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November 15, 1892.

No. 799.

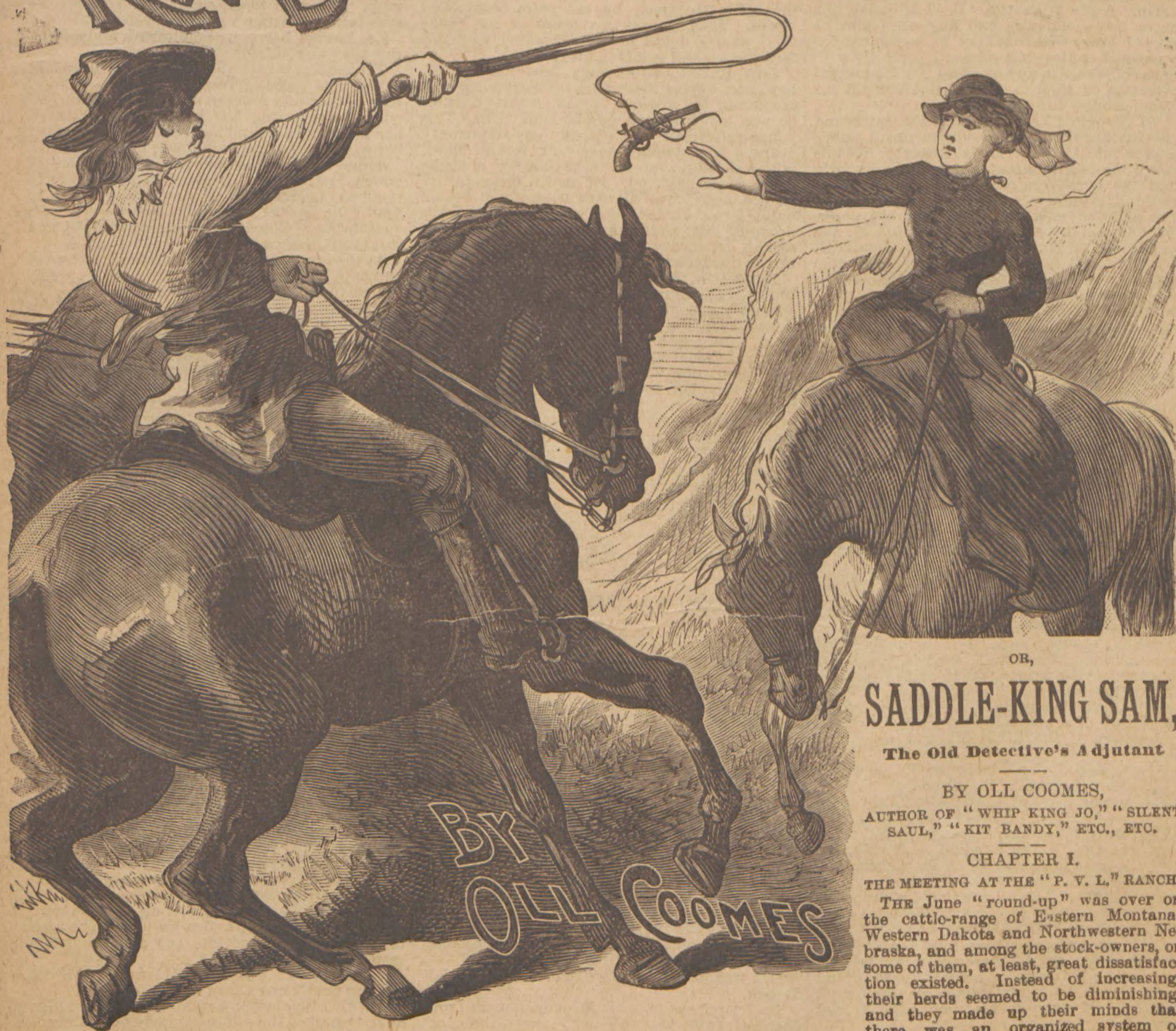
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a Year.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS.
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 Cents.

Vol. XXXI.

KIT BANDY'S BIG RUSTLE



OR,

SADDLE-KING SAM,

The Old Detective's Adjutant

BY OLL COOMES,

AUTHOR OF "WHIP KING JO," "SILENT SAUL," "KIT BANDY," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE MEETING AT THE "P. V. L." RANCH.

THE June "round-up" was over on the cattle-range of Eastern Montana, Western Dakota and Northwestern Nebraska, and among the stock-owners, or some of them, at least, great dissatisfaction existed. Instead of increasing, their herds seemed to be diminishing, and they made up their minds that there was an organized system of cattle-stealing going on somewhere. While it was true that many cattle were

THE SADDLE-KING'S TERRIBLE WEAPON CRACKED INSTEAD OF HER PISTOL; AND THE WEAPON WAS SNATCHED FROM HER HAND AND THROWN TO THE GROUND.

lost in rigorous winters, and by other natural causes, they were perceptible losses; but, there were other apparent or real losses that could not be accounted for upon any other theory than that thieves were at work.

Among those who felt themselves victims of range-robbers were Perrin, Veach and Langdon, owners of the "P. V. L." Ranch, which was located in Eastern Montana, some fifteen miles from M—C—. They owned perhaps one-third of all the cattle on that range, and, while the loss of a dozen or two head would hardly be noticed by the company, the annual shortage of a hundred or two head from unknown causes called for action.

So, after the last round-up was over, a meeting of all the stockmen on the aforesaid range was called to meet, on a certain day in July, at the "P. V. L." Ranch to take some action in regard to investigating the suspected evil, as well as to consider other matters in connection with their stock interests.

On the appointed day no less than twenty-five men assembled at the "P. V. L.," some of them coming over two hundred miles. Nine different ranches were represented. Each ranch, or company, presented, as credentials, a certificate showing that the company had been properly incorporated under the laws; also, a certificate of registration of its brands in the proper stock-journals. By these papers it was observed that three new companies had gone onto the range within the past ten months, and the new "brands" found at the last "round-up" were thus fully accounted for.

The question of suspected cattle-stealing was finally brought before the meeting by Colonel Perrin. Aside from the "P. V. L." folks, but one or two companies had any complaint to make of losses that could not be accounted for by natural causes; but all were perfectly willing to cooperate in any measure for the mutual protection of their interests. But how did the colonel propose to go about it?

"In Wyoming," said Perrin, "the cattle and horse interests are protected by mounted police paid for out of the Territorial treasury; but this system meets with great objections, especially from the taxpayers and homesteaders. I do not think, myself, it is exactly just; nor do I believe a dozen men galloping over the plains would accomplish as much in detecting thieves as one good, skillful man sent out unrestricted. I have in mind now one young ranchman who I believe would fill the bill to perfection, and if there's any stealing going on, either by stock being run off the range, or the alteration of brands, he would find it out; and that ranchman is Saddle-King Sam."

"He's too young, colonel—too young," exclaimed a voice.

"I know he's young in years," continued the colonel, "but he's gray-haired, so to speak, in experience. There isn't a man in Montana that knows the country better than Sam. He has been raised, you might say, in the saddle, hence his *sobriquet*. He is a fine horseman, a skillful shot, perfectly fearless and untiring, with a sagacity and judgment remarkable for one of his years; and, what is more, he is strictly honest and honorable. The combined wealth of this range, fear or favor, could not turn him from the path of honor."

After some discussion it was decided to adopt the colonel's plan, employ a special patrol and pay him for his services out of a general fund contributed by each of the companies.

Then the question as to the man for the work came up for consideration. Again Colonel Perrin presented the name of Saddle-King Sam.

Enoch Brooks, a rough, bearded man, with the face and head of a prize-fighter, and one of the proprietors of a new ranch away down on the head-waters of the Little Missouri, arose and said:

"Gentlemen, I don't know as I'd ought to have much to say, seein' I'm a stranger to you, and represent, perhaps, the smallest comp'ny on the range; but then, I feel as much interested as though we o' Sand Creek Ranch owned thousands instead o' a few hundred head o' cattle; and I think, as the gent over there, that Saddle-King Sam's too young for the work o' a range detective. He should be a man o' mature years and experienced in the work. My pard here, Jack Rubell, or, 'Lasso' Jack, as we call him, has had years of experience in the Injin Territory, Colorado and Wyoming as a range detective, and as he owns an interest in the Sand Creek Ranch, he has somethin' at stake, and, therefore, I'd suggest his name for special patrol."

Jack Rubell arose, when his friend had finished speaking. He was a tall, swarthy-faced

man of perhaps thirty years, with steel-gray eyes, a long, flat nose with a big red scar running across the "bridge" and extending onto either cheek. He was dressed in the regulation cowboy suit, and was girded about with a heavy belt, to which were appended two big revolvers and a huge knife.

At first sight "Lasso" Jack's face was not one calculated to inspire confidence, and but for his fine physique and pleasant bearing, he would have had little to recommend him, so far as personal appearance went.

"Gents," he said, with a slight bluster in his voice, "if I'd 'a' known my friend Brooks war goin' to say what he did, I'd 'a' squelched him afore he said it, for I've no hankerin' after a job o' huntin' cattle-thieves. As my friend said, I've been thar, and know what it is. Of all thieves, range thieves is the shrewdest and most cunnin'. I've helped to hunt maraudin' Apaches and outlaws, and am free to say it isn't as hard nor dangerous as runnin' down cattle-thieves. They have out patrols, too—detectives right 'mongst them they steal from. I've known two cases whar trusted cowboys war found to be in league with a gang o' thieves, and half-a-dozen range patrols had mysteriously disappeared before we run the thieves down. A man takes his life in his hands when he goes out to hunt cattle or hoss-thieves, for they're generally systematically organized. I've no desire for the job my friend 'd have me take; still, as I've a little interest in a ranch down on the Little Missouri, I'd never shirk any duty in my line o' bis'ness, whether huntin' thieves or punchin' steers."

Lasso Jack had made quite an impression upon the stockmen by his plain, outspoken words. That he was a veteran of the range there was no doubt in a single mind, and this fact was several points in his favor.

Jack Rubell had scarcely been seen seated, however, when a little buzz of excitement was created by the entrance of Sam Halliday, or, as he was better known, Saddle-King Sam. This young ranchman was scarcely one-and-twenty years of age, standing nearly six feet in height, with a slender, graceful form that was a model of physical manhood. He had a large, finely-shaped head, covered with long, silken brown hair; large, bright blue eyes, with slightly drooping lids; a straight and well-defined nose, and an expressive mouth shaded with a light-brown mustache.

Altogether, Sam Halliday was a handsome fellow, with a manly, open countenance, and just dash enough in his manner to bring out more clearly the prominent features of face and form. Nor were his good looks and fine physique all his personal attractions. He was a bright and intelligent young man, for, although he had grown up in the saddle, as it were, he had found time for a little study, and, with the help of others, had attained a fair education. So it was not only his skill as a horseman, ranchero, and pistol-shot, but his mental and social qualities, also, that made him a great favorite with those who knew him.

As there was a difference of opinion now as to which of the two, Saddle-King Sam or Lasso Jack, should be chosen for special patrol, the matter was submitted to a vote which resulted, two to one, in favor of young Halliday.

CHAPTER II.

ZOE.

WHEN the result of the vote selecting a patrol was announced, a look of disappointment clouded the broad face of Enoch Brooks, while his friend, Lasso Jack, with an indifference that all could see was assumed, moved to make the selection of Saddle-King Sam unanimous.

The meeting of the stockmen lasted until noon, when they adjourned to meet again upon call of the president of the association.

As soon as Colonel Perrin was alone, Saddle-King Sam called on him for instructions.

"Sam," the colonel said, "you know what we want, and what is expected of you. Use your own good judgment and the interest of the cattle-owners will be subserved."

"Then I shall ride up to M—C—, this afternoon," Sam replied, "and procure some things I need for the long ride, and depart tomorrow for the range."

An hour later the young patrol was galloping up the valley in the direction of M—C—, which was fifteen miles north of the "P. V. L." Ranch.

As he rode along, his keen eyes, more from force of habit than necessity, swept the ever-changing scene around him. Not a bird crossed his vision unnoticed—his old habits of eternal

vigilance asserted themselves, even though there were no dangers to be feared along that valley.

Mile after mile slipped behind him, and he was well on his way when he discovered a horseman coming down the vale toward him. As they drew together, he saw it was a woman—yea, even recognized her, and in an instant the warm blood mounted to his face, and the keen blaze of his watchful eyes was subdued by the soft luster of a lover's admiration and joy.

The two rapidly approached each other, and, finally, with greetings of happy surprise, drew rein alongside each other—so close that Sam reached out and took the maiden's hand and pressed it—and more, he leaned over in his stirrup and pressed his lips to those of the fairest of all fair girls to Sam Halliday.

And a lovely girl, indeed, was Zoe Randall—a maiden of eighteen summers, with liquid brown eyes; and her beauty, to Sam, seemed enhanced as she sat before him in her saddle, clad in her pretty riding-habit, blushing to the very temples.

"Sam Halliday," she said, reprovingly, as a smile played over her lips, "you take liberties; have you turned robber?"

"Oh, well," answered Sam, "then if you consider that *stolen*, I'll return it," and before Miss Zoe could offer a protest, restitution was made in another kiss.

"There, now, Mr. Road-Agent," Zoe retorted, "I hope you are satisfied."

"Oh, yes! in a measure," answered Sam, "but where are you going, Zoe?"

"To meet you," the maiden answered.

"But how did you know I was coming?"

"I just guessed at it, which was father to the wish. I wanted to see you," Zoe replied, her eyes beaming with a light of inward pleasure.

Zoe headed her pony northward, and side by side the two rode slowly up the valley.

The maiden was the niece of Henry Randall, a wealthy bachelor residing in M—C—. Her father and mother were both dead, and when quite young her kind uncle had taken her into his care, and had reared and educated her with all the deep solicitude of a father.

Some six months previous to the time of which I write, Mr. Randall had moved from Colorado to Montana. Six months previous to that time Saddle-King Sam had made the acquaintance of Zoe, in the Centennial State, and this acquaintance finally ripened into love.

As the two rode along they talked over what had happened since their previous meeting, and this finally led Sam to observe:

"Zoe, I'm going away to-morrow on a thousand or two miles' ride over the great stock range. I was selected by the stockmen to-day as a kind of special detective or patrol."

"Will it not be very dangerous, Sam?" eagerly inquired Zoe.

"Not much more so than the routine work of the ranch. It will be a little harder work, for I'll be out in wind, rain and sunshine, and may have to go hungry once in awhile, and have to sleep on the open prairie or wherever night overtakes me."

"Oh! how lonesome you'll be, Sam!" Zoe exclaimed.

"Not at all, Zoe; you'll always be with me in thoughts, and that will be good company, I am sure."

"How long will you be away, Sam?" the maiden asked, her heart thrilling with joy at his last remark.

"Two or three months."

"What! so long as that?"

Before Sam could make reply their horses stopped short and sprang backward, with a quick snort of affright.

A little cry burst from Zoe's lips for she was almost pitched forward from the saddle.

The cause of the animals' fright was quickly discovered in the presence and warning sounds of a large rattlesnake that lay coiled in the road before them, its ugly head raised to strike, and its quivering tail sending forth its ominous, shivering rattle.

"Just wait a moment and I'll settle that highwayman," remarked Sam, reaching for his long cattle-whip that hung at the side of his saddle.

Undoing the whip, the young ranchero flung the great lash into the air, gave his arm a quick whirl, when the end of the thong shot forward with a hissing sound and a snap, and the head of the serpent leaped into the air, completely severed from the body.

"There, now!" said Sam, "I guess you'll not hold up another couple of quiet people."

A little, shuddering laugh escaped Zoe's lips as she watched the glittering body of the headless snake writhing and twisting in graceful repulsiveness for several moments.

Riding on, Sam kept his whip in his hand, ever and anon giving Zoe an exhibition of his phenomenal skill with the lash by clipping off the head of a weed or a flower that grew by the wayside.

At a point about two miles from the town an old Indian trail crossed the valley at right angles. Here, also, the valley narrowed to a couple rods in width, with high, wooded bluffs on either side. The young people were within a few paces of this intersection of road and trail when a veiled woman, dressed in black, dashed out upon a spirited pony from behind the bluff and drew rein, squarely confronting Sam and Zoe, who drew up, the young patrol exclaiming:

"Hullo! who now?"

The stranger threw back her veil in an excited manner, revealing the face of a woman of perhaps thirty years—a face that would have been considered handsome but for the wicked, frenzied look that blazed in a pair of black, evil eyes.

"Belle Rankin!" burst involuntarily from Zoe's lips as she caught sight of the woman's face.

"Yes, Belle Rankin!" repeated the woman, her voice half-choked with passion; "you know me, you meddlesome, white-faced hussy! I have waited for you here! I have sworn to kill you, and I now mean to do it!"

The mad creature proceeded to carry out her threat, but it had been made too soon, for already that long whip was in the air, and just as she leveled her revolver on the object of her wrath, the Saddle-King's terrible weapon cracked instead of her pistol, and the weapon was snatched from her hand and thrown to the ground a dozen feet away.

The woman shot a glance at the young patrol such as he had never before seen in human eyes; then, with a cry like that of a tigress suddenly deprived of her prey, she turned her horse, flung back a curse at the couple, and dashed away down the trail and disappeared among the wooded hills.

Sam dismounted, picked up her revolver and placing it in his pocket, remounted his horse and then the two rode on up the valley.

Zoe's face was white as death, and her slender form was trembling with fear.

"Well, I'll be blest!" exclaimed Sam, "if this don't fairly take my breath! Zoe, who was that beautiful tigress? Why does she want to kill you? I didn't know you'd an enemy on earth."

"Oh, Sam!" cried the girl, "it is that horrible woman, Belle Rankin!"

"Who is she, anyhow, Zoe?" questioned Sam.

"A female adventuress and desperado," responded the maiden. "I first knew her in Colorado. She came to Golden where we resided, and, with her pretty face, and charming manners, won the affections of my bachelor uncle, Henry Randall. They finally became engaged to be married and the wedding was set for an early day. I never liked the woman, for I believed all she was after was my uncle's wealth—that she was an adventuress. My woman's instinct proved correct. An old ranchman came to Golden, one day, and recognized her as a woman who had once been the companion of the notorious female desperado, Belle Starr. Further investigation revealed the fact that she was already married, having separated from her husband but a few months before. Of course, Uncle Henry dropped her as though she had been a scorpion. She disappeared from Golden, leaving a note for uncle in which she threatened his life and mine. As we had nothing to hold us there, I prevailed on my uncle to leave the State, and we came to Montana. Here, I thought, we would be safe—out of her reach; but she has followed us, with vengeance still in her wicked heart."

"I ought to have lassoed the tigress, and taken her to town," declared Sam; "I presume, now, I'll come in for a share of her vengeance for thwarting her murderous designs. If the rawhide on the end of my whip touched her hand when I flipped her revolver out of her fingers, she'll have something to remember me by for several days. But, let us ride on, Zoe, to town, and I'll put the officers of the law on the tigress's track, and maybe they can catch her."

They galloped on and soon reached town. At the door of her uncle's residence Sam left Zoe, and hurried up to the mayor's office.

In half an hour a party of mounted police, led by Saddle-King Sam himself, rode away in pursuit of the would-be murderess.

Her horse's tracks were plain along the old trail, and they had followed them less than fifty rods from the scene of the attempted murder of Zoe, when they found other fresh horse-tracks

enter the trail. This convinced them that the woman had confederates, and but for the fact that Zoe was expected to return to town that afternoon alone, these confederates would have been on hand to aid her in her murderous work.

Nothing daunted, the party rode on into the hills, but darkness coming on they were finally compelled to give up the pursuit and return to the town.

Saddle-King Sam remained in M—C—that night, and early next morning he rode down to Henry Randall's house to take leave of Zoe before departing. He was received most cordially by Mr. Randall, who thanked him over and over for his promptness in saving Zoe's life.

"Zoe," Randall said, "wants me to leave here and go to St. Paul or Omaha to live where that woman will hardly dare follow us, but I'm not going to be chased all over the United States by a female tiger-cat. I'm going to stay right here and fight it out on these grounds."

After tarrying an hour or two with his sweet-heart, Sam bade her good-by and started southward on his ride over the great range.

CHAPTER III.

DIANA, THE FAIR HUNTRESS.

"THAR, boys, by the great Rosycrusians! are somethin' to cure the eye-ache!"

The speaker was the noted hunter and borderman, Old Tom Rattler, and those to whom his remark was addressed were Bob Marshall and Harry Foster.

With Old Tom the reader has often met, therefore no introduction is necessary. Bob Marshall was a stalwart young homesteader of Central Dakota, three-and-twenty years of age. Harry Foster was a friend of Bob's and two years his junior. He was a young Iowa school-teacher, handsome, intelligent and jolly.

A few years previous the two young men had planned a trip to the mountains and cattle-ranges of Montana, partly for pleasure and recreation in hunting, and partly with a view to business; and they were now on their way, under the guidance of Tom Rattler, whose services they had been fortunate enough to secure.

All were well armed, and well mounted upon bronchos, and at the time we introduce them, were upon a boundless plain of Western Dakota.

Two days previous they had passed the then limit of homestead settlements. For two days they had ridden westward without sight of anything save the boundless ocean of prairie rolling away to where its billows seemed to break against the horizon of the blue September sky. To the young homesteader and teacher, there was a monotonous sameness in the great expanse that made them restless.

Old Tom laughed at them, for dearly as the old borderer loved the wild excitement of hill and forest, the tumult of battle, and the roaring hilarity of the camp, he also loved the solitude of the plain, and as they rode along many were the rude, yet poetic apostrophes he made to the blue sky arching over them, and the murmurous sea of prairie across which they were drifting.

While still in this solitude, Harry Foster facetiously began to complain of the "eye-ache," produced by a continuous looking at nothing, when, suddenly, there appeared, upon the crest of a swell about eighty rods before them, a horseman and three dogs, and, at sight of which, Old Tom uttered the words with which this chapter opens.

"Blessed sight! be he Indian or prairie-pirate!" burst from the lips of the impulsive schoolmaster.

The appearance of the horseman was quite a surprise, for he seemed to have risen up out of the earth, and still greater was the surprise when Bob Marshall announced, after taking a look with his field-glass, that the horseman was a woman!

"I'll venture the assertion she's crazy as a March hare," Harry observed. "No sane woman would be out here unless she is a poet-crank like our friend Rattler."

"We'll soon know, for she's comin' on the lope this way," Bob Marshall remarked.

True enough; she rode straight toward them and soon had drawn rein before them.

And never were men more astounded than those three, for they saw that she was a young girl with face and form of exquisite beauty. She wore a short riding-skirt, a neat-fitting jacket of blue velvet, and a jaunty little straw hat, beneath which clustered a profusion of short, brown curls. Across her lap lay a hand-

some little rifle, and a knife hung in a leather sheath at her belt.

She was mounted upon a clean-limbed pony, and followed by a fox-hound and two splendid-looking greyhounds.

As the girl reined up before the three men she manifested as much surprise as they did. There was a startled look in her bright, hazel eyes, and a shadow of fear swept over her face. She was the first to speak, doing so the instant she drew rein. And this is what she said:

"Pardon me, gentlemen, I thought you were a party of friends; the sun was in my face and I could not see well."

"God bless ye! by the great Rosycrusians! we are yer friends, miss!" was the prompt response of Old Rattler, as he doffed his greasy cap and struck it a blow with his fist as if to give emphasis to his words.

Harry and Bob lifted their hats and bowed to the fair little stranger, the former adding:

"Yes, I can assure you of our friendship, and hope we do not find you in distress."

"Oh, no; thank you!" the girl replied, the tremor of fear now gone from her voice.

"But we're ferociously surprised," Old Tom declared, "to meet a gal, and a pretty one, too, here in this solitood o' solitoods. Who might ye be, anyhow?"

"Diana Moore," she answered, a bit confused by the old hunter's complimentary observation; "I am the daughter of a homesteader from Eastern Dakota. Father and a number of our neighbors are camped on the river about twenty miles south of here. They came out to hunt deer, and when I saw you gentlemen I thought you were some of our party."

"Then you are a hunter, too, eh?" queried Old Tom.

"And why not?" replied the girl, with a smile.

"Gal, if I war a pirate 'stead o' Old Tom Rattler, I'd show you why. I'd steal you!"

"Then I'm glad you're Tom Rattler," the girl replied; "I have heard of that noted hunter, and I am sure he and his friends will be welcome at our camp."

"Thanks, Dianar," the old man returned, with apparent regret; "we're on our way to the mountains, and are already behind time. I'd be delighted to visit your camp, and 'spect I would if I war 'bout a hundred years younger."

"Do you mean to go straight across the Bad Lands?" the maiden asked.

"Straight through, 'cross rivers, Bad Lands and all," Tom answered, somewhat diverted by the question.

At this juncture the girl removed one of her gloves to push back a curl that stole out on her brow from under her hat. In doing so she dropped the glove to the ground, and, quickly dismounting, Harry Foster picked it up and returned it to her.

"Thank you," she said, sweetly, and with a smile that made Bob Marshall and Old Tom envious of the gallant recipient.

Scarcely had Harry regained his saddle when Diana's fox-hound gave voice to a deep baying, off a few yards to the right. Instantly every eye was turned in the direction of the sound, and, to the surprise of all, they saw a beautiful deer go bounding out of some tall grass in a depression in the plain, followed by the bellowing hound.

And quick as a flash the great greyhounds were off like arrows in pursuit, their long bodies stretched out and settled almost to the ground; and Diana's pony, inspired with the spirit of the chase, pricked up its ears, gave a quick snort, smote the ground smartly with its hoof; then, at a word from its mistress, it bounded away after the hounds, and the three men sat silent in their saddles, gazing in suspense, surprise and admiration after the graceful, swaying form of the daring young huntress.

Away over the plain, rising and falling like objects on the crest of ocean waves, went the deer, the hounds, the horse and rider, and when the latter had at last faded into a mere speck, Old Tom ventured to remark:

"The dashed little madcap! ar'n't she a clipper? a lily-lipped hummer? What now, Harry, have you got to say o' this sublime solitude?"

"It's a mockery—a cruel mockery!" answered young Foster, "and I've a notion to turn and—"

"Follow the gal," put in Tom; "poor boy! you've got a fatal dose. That glove, that smile, that sweet 'thank ye,' have done the work for you! All that lies beyond this spot westward 'll continue to be a woeful desert—a drowsy solitude to Harry Foster. Pretty Dianar! poor Harry! grand solitude! Boys, let's be movin'."

And the three rode on over the plain toward the West.

CHAPTER IV.

AFOOT IN THE BAD LANDS.

"BOYS, if this fog don't lift soon the chances are that we'll be elected for wolf-bait."

Again the speaker was Old Tom Rattler, and his words, uttered in a dry, husky voice, were spoken half in earnest.

Four days had passed since we met the hunt-and his two young companions, Bob Marshall and Harry Foster, on the plains of Montana, and now we find them afoot, and lost, in the very heart of the Bad Lands of Eastern Montana, wandering about footsore and weary, suffering the pangs of hunger and thirst.

Never in all his wandering, eventful life had such a mishap befallen Tom Rattler; but it was caused by a combination of peculiar circumstances against which it was impossible to have guarded unless possessed of a supernatural prescience. The first was a dense, black fog which settled over the land the first night they reached the Bad Lands. The second was the loss of their horses that same night. Having no water but the meager supply in their canteens, the animals, suffering with thirst, had wandered off, as they supposed, in quest of drink.

When morning dawned the fog still lingered. All day they searched in vain for their animals. Finally they went into camp to await the lifting of the fog. Another night passed. The fog still hung, deeper and blacker than ever. Their food and water supplies were exhausted, and they realized that they must be moving or they would perish.

Concealing their saddles and all their outfit except their arms and a blanket each, they started on their search for water amid the gloomy shadows of that "land of desolation and death."

At some remote period it seemed that a seething, underground fire had raged over countless acres of the plain—so hot that in places the earth's surface swelled into blisters great and small, some of which had burst, ejecting rocks and ashes and grotesque heaps and figures of scorched clay. In other parts the earth's surface seemed to have sunk, forming shallow basins, channels and pitfalls. Over this upheaved, sunken, scarified landscape Time had kindly spread a covering of vegetation—sage-brush, stunted pine bushes, thickets of wild plum and creeping, clinging vines.

Under the most favorable circumstances, the Bad Lands of Montana were dismal enough, but enshrouded in a low-lying fog, it was the land of desolation, indeed.

Tom Rattler had never been through these parts, but, with full confidence in his "bump" of navigation, he felt no hesitancy in undertaking the journey. He anticipated a scarcity of water, but hoped to reach the Powder River, or some of its tributaries, before they should feel the pangs of thirst. He had not calculated on the dismal fog, and the loss of their horses, and in their search for the animals they had become totally bewildered. Believing the fog would soon rise, they took no bearings. They could not see five rods before them, and what they did see had that confusing sameness that drives a bewildered brain into madness.

"It's pretty tough, friends," Bob Marshall responded, in reply to Old Tom's prediction of what stared them in the face unless the fog soon lifted, "but then, we're out for fun and recreation, and suppose we'll have to take the bitter with the sweet. This fog's as likely to go as quick as it came. I can stand it awhile yet, I'm sure."

"You've got the true grit, boy," Old Rattler exclaimed; "we're not dead men yet, by several gasps, tho' a bar'l o' water and a broiled deer or two wouldn't come amiss at any time, now."

"Don't talk of water and broiled venison, Tom, or you will drive me mad," put in Harry Foster, striving like a hero to appear cheerful; "a hunk of lean coyote, I believe, would not taste bad."

"Well, we'll have to keep movin' now, and take what comes," was Old Tom's encouraging suggestion; and so they trudged on for hours among the hills and bushes until suddenly brought to a stand by a sound like the barking of a dog.

Peering through the gloom around him, Old Rattler discovered that which caused him to drop to his knees, motioning his friends down as he did so.

"What is it, Tom?" asked Marshall, in a whisper.

Old Tom pointed through the bushes to a form standing on a high knoll about twenty paces away. It was that of an Indian warrior, who seemed of Titan proportions as he loomed up in the fog like a shadow in the gloaming.

He stood turning his head from side to side as if listening for something he could not see.

Presently the giant was joined by two friends. They were white men—rough, bearded, brigandish-looking fellows. For a minute or two the three stood conversing in inaudible tones; then they turned and started down the knoll directly toward the hunter and his two young friends.

"Boys," Rattler whispered, a stern expression upon his face, "they're outlaws, and we're in for it! They're comin' this way! When the tug comes, hit 'em hard, for it'll be life or death!"

CHAPTER V.

THE WOLF-PIT.

As the three men whom Rattler had declared were outlaws approached the old hunter and his two young friends, the latter drew their revolvers and prepared for battle; but to their happy disappointment, the Indian and his followers turned suddenly to the right and moved away, passing within fifteen feet of the secreted trio.

"By the great Rosycrusians!" exclaimed Old Tom, with an air of relief as the three passed out of sight; "I thought I war goin' to git a chance to show you youngsters a sample o' the Red River Epidemic's fightin' qualities."

"Those fellows may not be outlaws, after all," suggested Bob Marshall; "they may be cattlemen looking after stock."

"They're too hard-lookin' bats for that, boy; I'll bet a tub o' ice-water and a nicely broiled deer with dressin' that they're outlaws, and that their den's not far away."

"If that's the case," argued Bob, "then there must be water near."

"That's what, boy," coincided Rattler; "but say, do you folks reemember that that gal, Dianar, axed us if we war goin' to cross the Bad Lands?"

"I do," answered Marshall.

"What of it?" questioned Harry, fixing his brown eyes searchingly on the old hunter's face; "I hope you do not connect that girl with these outlaws in any way, do you, Rattler?"

"It are pretty hard to connect an angel with sich lookin' varlets, I assure you, boy," responded Tom, in a tone that was not entirely satisfactory to Harry; but he let the matter drop there.

"Those villains—if such they are," observed Bob, "must have found our horses, and are out lookin' for the riders."

"That's 'bout the size o' it, boy," Rattler assented; "but now I think we'd be safe in movin' on—follow them critters, and maybe we'll strike water."

The three at once moved away in the direction the supposed outlaws had gone, and soon they came to a well-beaten path winding among the hills and bushes. Therein they discovered the tracks of both men and horses, all pointing in one direction.

Following the path for nearly half a mile they finally descended into a little ravine where, to their unbounded joy, they came suddenly upon a spring of clear, sparkling water.

Like half-famished animals they made a dive for the water, and for the next ten minutes all else was forgotten in the enjoyment of the "delicious wetness," as Old Tom termed it.

After his thirst had been assuaged, Old Tom examined the spring and its surroundings, and at once became satisfied that it was the resort of men as well as animals. The surplus water had worn a little channel along the ravine, and by following this the old plainsman hoped to find its outlet in a creek. He knew the trend of the rivers of western Montana, and if they should be fortunate enough to strike a fair-sized stream he was satisfied he could get their bearings by the flow of the current.

So, filling their canteens at the spring, they started down the ravine. They made their way with no little difficulty, for the vale was choked with wild plum bushes and vines; but, creeping and crowding through, they finally came to a wide, shallow sink-hole, or basin, into which the little rill fell and at the very sight of which they recoiled with a shudder of horror.

The basin, at first sight, looked as though it had been excavated by man, but was, in reality, one of those natural freaks of the Bad Lands. It was not less than two hundred yards wide at the narrowest place and nearly circular in form. At the lowest point its walls were not less than eight feet high and perpendicular all the way around. There were places, however, along this wall where the work of man was plainly visible. Where there had evidently been a break, the earth at the bottom had been dug

away and the bank brought to the perpendicular. The bottom was a level of ash-colored dirt and sand, and over this were strewn scores of animal carcasses both large and small.

It was in mistaking the latter, at first sight, for human skeletons that caused the three men to start with a shudder of horror—the revulsion made the stronger by the sight of a score of gaunt wolves that were trotting to and fro among the ghastly relics—fitting in and out of holes which honeycombed the walls of the basin.

"Horrors of horrors!" exclaimed Harry Foster, as his eyes swept over the place, "what on earth have we run into?"

"A wolf-fold, by the great Rosycrusians!" answered Old Tom, a look of unutterable disgust sweeping over his face.

"What's a wolf-fold, Tom? Do you mean a wolf-den?" again questioned the young school-master.

"A wolf-fold," explained Rattler, "is a place kept for breedin' wolves for their pelts which bring a small price, and their skulls which bring a bounty o' from one to four dollars each, 'cordin' to the place where offered. In all my hoary 'sperience I never found but one sich before. It's the work o' the lowest and meanest of all God's mean critters. Ye see, wolves are prolific breeders—anywhar from one to six or even seven to a litter. Nighly every settled county in the adj'inin' States pays a bounty on wolf-sculps for wolves killed in the county. In the sheep-raisin' counties the price paid is a big inducement to hunt the varmints down. But, it's easier for a lazy villain—who's doubtless an outlaw—to steal cattle from the range to feed a pack o' breeders than hunt the wolves on the plains. Besides, it keeps up the supply."

"When the crop is ripe the pelts and skulls are harvested. The harvester goes over into the bounty-payin' counties, swears he killed the wolves in said counties, gits his bounty, and returns to his breedin' pens and raises another crop. For fear o' bein' suspected, he never, or seldom, goes twice to the same county. While waitin' for the crop to grow, he can put in his time stealin' hosses, or do a little counterfeitin'—anything ornery to gratify his propensities for meanness. But, wolf-breedin' is the lowest of all low meanness. Robbin' coaches and blind orphans are reespectable besides it; but, that's just what's goin' on here, boys, and it's a boss place for it, too; for it does seem that the devil has homesteaded this blighted land, and draped it with the misty smoke o' hell for his tenants' purposes. I'll go you a roasted quarter o' a prize beef, with oyster trimmin's, that this pen's been used for years for wolf-breedin'. See, the water from the spring falls into a stone trough for the beasts, the surplus sinkin' into the porous earth."

"The horrible brutes look as though they were nearly starved," observed Bob Marshall. "It's queer they don't dig out of there."

"They haven't sense enough," replied Tom; "a wolf'll dig under and down, but never up. But, boys, if we're caught 'round these diggin's, our carcasses'll go into that pen. Mine would be a leetle like bilt owl, but yours, boys, would be quail on toast to the ki-yotes."

"Heavens, Tom! you're a ghastly joker!" exclaimed Harry, with a shudder. "Let us leave here at once."

"We're 'bout as safe one place as another," responded Rattler, "so long as this fog lasts."

"If we could only get away and notify the authorities," put in Bob, "the wolf-raising business would take a tumble."

"A dozen well-armed men," replied Tom, "could bushwhack a hull regiment for a month in this—Ah! harkee!"

It was the sound of distant voices he heard.

Quickly the three drew back from the rim of the basin into the dense bushes, and listened.

The shouts of men, the pounding of hooved feet, and the sharp, pistol-like report of whips, are what they now heard; and, as the sounds grew plainer each moment, it was quite clear that those who produced them were approaching the Wolf Fold.

And they were. Into sight, down a narrow, lane-like passage, on the opposite side of the pit, came a panting steer, with blazing eyes and drooling mouth, pursued by half a dozen mounted men, whose very presence was suggestive of human vultures.

With wild yells and stinging blows of their long whips, the long-haired and ferocious-looking horsemen pushed on the ox, closing in closer and closer upon it as they approached the basin.

The wolves, hearing the noise, and knowing what it meant, went swarming from their holes

in the bank by the dozen and the score, yelping, snarling and snapping—tumbling over each other, leaping into the air with wolfish laughter, and against the walls of their prison, making the place hideous with a most infernal noise.

"They're goin' to force the animal into the pit to feed the wolves!" whispered Old Tom, toying with the knife at his girdle as though his fingers itched to use it.

His words proved correct. Blind with pain and fear the steer dashed on to the rim of the basin, leaped into the air and plunged headlong into the pit, falling upon its head and turning a complete somersault.

In an instant the poor animal was buried beneath a swarm of wolves, but with a frantic bellow it rose to its feet, shook off the pack and dashed across the bone-strewn arena, bellowing with affright, leaping into the air and tossing aloft its head to elude the fangs snapping at its throat. Away swept the ravenous pack, old and young, after it, while the wolf-herders, now a dozen strong—white men and Indians—fairly roared with delight.

The very souls of the three hunters revolted at the brutal spectacle, and it was only by a desperate effort of will-power that Old Tom restrained himself from shooting the animal to end its suffering.

To and fro across the basin dashed the steer, surrounded by the starved pack. Several of the latter were trampled down and crippled, but, like wounded snakes, they dragged themselves along behind, rendered all the more desperate by the pangs of pain.

Time and again the steer, blind with fear, dashed against the walls of the basin, driving its horns deep into the earth, recoiling half-stunned by the shock and blinded by dust and dirt. Now and then it stumbled and fell to its knees among the pack, and when it arose, wolves were clinging to its haunches, its side and its throat, and it was only by the most frantic efforts it shook them off.

The head and throat were the principal points of attack, and now and then a wolf was impaled upon a horn or tossed high in the air while endeavoring to reach one or the other of these vulnerable points.

A time or two the animal backed against the wall and endeavored to defend itself; but it was quickly forced to fly with half a dozen wolves clinging and dangling to its bleeding body.

Roars of laughter from the outlaws greeted every point of advantage gained by the wolves.

Slowly the strength of the steer gave way, but it struggled desperately to the last, and when it finally went down, it continued its piteous moans and struggles until half devoured by the vulpine horde.

The wolf-herders now turned and departed the way they had come. Their work was finished. They had fed their pack.

Almost sick at heart, Tom and his friends arose to depart.

"Well, folks, what do you think of that exhibition of modern Romanism?"

It was a strange voice that asked the question, and the startled trio turned quickly, Rattler grasping his revolver. They found themselves confronted by a tall, handsome young stranger clad in a ranchero's suit, who stood with folded arms, regarding them with a grim smile.

It was Saddle-King Sam, the Range Patrol!

CHAPTER VI.

WHAT SADDLE-KING DISCOVERED.

It required but a single glance at the honest, manly face of Saddle-King Sam to tell Rattler and his companions that they were not confronted by an enemy, and releasing his revolver, Old Tom exclaimed:

"Rosycrusians! stranger, it are dangerous to creep up on the heels o' Tom Rattler! Who be you, anyhow?"

"My name's Sam Halliday," the young patrol replied, "and I'm glad to meet Old Tom Rattler."

"Be you the Sam they call Saddle-King?" questioned Rattler, taking the young ranchero's hand.

"The same," answered Sam.

"Then shake, you young rascal!" exclaimed the old hunter, "for, by the Rosycrusians! you're a lily-lipped hummer and deserve the honor o' the Red River Epidemic's acquaintance. Here, Saddle-King, this is my friend, Bob Marshall, and this, Harry Foster—two boys that's takin' lessons under Tom Rattler."

Saddle-King Sam shook hands with the young men, addressing them in the free, hospitable way of an old acquaintance.

"Boys," he said, "I never met Tom Rattler before, but I've heard of him often, and I must confess I find you in good company, if not in a very delectable country."

"And if one can judge by appearance," replied Harry Foster, "we will have nothing to regret in making your acquaintance."

"Thank you; I hope not," Sam answered, "though I am not a little astonished to find any one in these parts except outlaws and coyotes."

"Wal, I'm frisky glad you found us, Sam Saddle-King," declared Old Tom; "for to tell ye the holy, sanctified truth, Bob and Harry there are lost and I'm with them, in that—clean lost."

"What! Tom Rattler, the hunter and plainsman, lost?" queried Sam, a broad smile playing over his honest face.

"Lost! yes, wusser than that Israelite tribe. Our hosses got away from us, the fog settled around us, we eat up our bread and meat and jellies and tarts, and drank all our wine and imported liquors, and, asides from a square drink o' water an hour ago, food's a foreigner to our collapsed stomachs."

"I've an abundance, such as it is," said Sam, "not over a mile from here, and if you'll come with me, I'll divide with you, and give you your bearings."

"Lead on, Samuel," commanded Old Tom, "and we'll foller with nimble steps. I've had to buckle up my belt fourteen times to keep from feelin' empty."

"You must be as hungry as those wolves," suggested Sam.

"Rosycrusians! what do you think o' that wolf business, Sam, anyway?"

"I think it fun for the outlaws, but frightfully dyspeptic to the cattle business," was Sam's answer, "for the bush-rangers are not only wolf-breeders, but a gang of shrewd cattle-thieves whose business will come to an end as soon as I get back to headquarters."

"Then you're out patrolling the range, eh?"

"Exactly," replied Sam. "But come, let's be moving down to my camp, which is a plum thicket where I left my horse."

The young patrol led the way through the hills, going in an opposite direction from that taken by the bushrangers.

"When did you strike this devil's nest, Sam?" asked Rattler, as they moved along.

"Yesterday, and I must confess this foggy weather has been an immense thing in my favor. Since July last—nearly two and-a-half months, have I been on the range trying to locate these thieves, and under cover of the fog I have at last succeeded. To-day I made a discovery that'll be a stunner to somebody, and, as soon as you get to camp, and have appeased your hunger on such as my larder contains, I'll tell you what it is."

They soon reached the thicket where Saddle-King had left his horse and Winchester. From a pair of capacious saddle-bags he produced bread and meat and divided it among his hungry, new-found friends.

After the three had satisfied their cravings, Old Tom humorously observed, addressing Sam:

"Now, landlord, while we pick our teeth in the parlor o' *Hotel de Plum Thicket*, we'll be pleased to listen to the story you promised us."

"All right," replied Sam, taking a diary and pencil from his pocket. "To begin with, Perrin, Veach and Langdon are the heaviest cattle-owners in Montana. For some time they have been losing stock, and became satisfied they were being stolen. I was sent out as a special patrol to look after matters in the interest of all the cattle companies on the range, as well as that of Perrin, Veach and Langdon."

"I'll not undertake to give you the details of all my long and lonely rides by day and night; but about two weeks ago I concluded to visit Sand Creek Ranch, which is located on Sand Creek, a tributary of the Little Missouri. It was a new ranch and far away from any other. I'd never been there, but had no difficulty in finding the place, and such a lonely, desolate place it was! Not a man was about the little cabin, nor could I find one around anywheres. The door, however, had been left open, as is the custom of most ranches, when all are away, as an invitation to the sojourner to enter and help himself. I entered the cabin and looked around and then left."

"There was such oppressive silence in and around the place that it made me nervous, and supposing the men were off, perhaps on a visit to some other ranch, I rode away. This ranch is owned, I will here remark, by one Enoch Brooks and a man called Lasso Jack, and one or two others whose names I forget."

"About midnight four days ago, I was aroused from my rest in a brush-patch on a

creek one hundred miles west of here, by the sound of voices, crack of whips and tramp of hoofs. Crawling to the edge of the plain I discovered half a dozen or more white men and Indians driving a bunch of cattle eastward with whip and spur.

"I made up my mind they were cattle-thieves and at once prepared to follow them, which I did. I kept out of their sight, and as daylight approached I dropped far behind. I discovered, however, that when the sun arose the thieves had all disappeared from sight, while the cattle were lying down resting on the plain after their night's drive."

"I felt satisfied the thieves were concealed somewhere near, waiting for darkness, under which to renew their drive, and in this I was right. During the day the cattle had drifted some five miles down the plain, and as soon as it was dark I moved down toward them, and found the thieves had appeared from their hiding and were again pushing the herd eastward. I followed, and during the night this fog settled over the plain. It proved a good thing for me and the robbers, also, for when day dawned they did not conceal themselves, but under cover of the fog pushed on."

"Well, to shorten my story, they finally entered the Bad Lands and after a day and night's drive came to a halt about two miles north of this spot. They drove the cattle—about fifty head—into a canyon or basin something like the Wolf-Pen."

"Selecting this thicket as a base of operation, I left my horse and outfit and set out to reconnoiter the bushrangers' situation. Guided by the shouts of voices and the occasional bellowing of a steer I made my way to the thieves' corral, and from a point where I could command a full view of all I discovered the villains—ten to twenty of them, red and white—engaged in branding cattle, or rather in changing the brands already on the stock!"

"I discovered that the bulk of the cattle when they went into the corral bore the brand of the firm of Perrin, Veach and Langdon, of Montana. Their brand, on the left broadside of the animal, was three letters of their names with a bar between—I'll show you."

With his pencil Sam drew upon a leaf of his diary these characters:

"P-V-L."

"That brand the bushrangers were changing," the young patrol went on. "By adding a loop to the lower end of the P, they made a B of it; and by attaching another V to the one already there, a W was produced; and by placing another line to the L, E was produced. Then, to conceal the short bars into which some of the new letters were run, a long, horizontal bar was burned across all three letters, over the short bars, and when the cattle were turned out of that branding-pen, they bore the new brand B. W. E. on a bar."

"Of course, there was a minor brand on the right side, and that was changed also; so you see, when those cattle are driven back to the range from which they were taken under cover of night, they will not carry the brand of Perrin, Veach and Langdon, but the duly recorded brand of the owners of the Sand Creek Ranch."

"Then, by the Rosycrusians!" exclaimed Old Tom, "them Sand Creekers are royal cattle-thieves."

"Exactly!" declared Saddle-King; "and among the outfit at the branding-pen I recognized Enoch Brooks and the gent who was my rival for special patrol, Lasso Jack."

"Well! well!" exclaimed Harry Foster, "that is a delectable state of business—wolf-breeding and cattle-stealing by the wholesale. The villains are certainly as bold as they are unprincipled."

"The scheme of changing brands is not a new one by any means," Sam went on. "The thieves always select the brand easiest changed, and of the strongest company, knowing the loss would not be discovered as readily as a company with a small herd would be likely to do. The 'P. V. L.' brand is one easily changed, and the Sand Creek thieves are getting in their work. I noticed, however, they did not touch any of the 'P. V. L.' steers or cows having any peculiar natural marks, through fear, I suppose, it might be recognized by its owner bearing somebody else's brand, and thus lead to detection. So you see the thieves' mode of procedure is to find a bunch of 'P. V. L.' cattle on the range, drive them this way at night, conceal themselves in the daytime so that, if the cattle should be discovered by a cowboy, he would naturally suppose they were drifting away of their own accord, as they frequently do. As soon as branded, they are then taken back to the range,

proper, and others brought in here to be doctored.

"But, my friends, I had almost forgotten to tell you of another thing that has given me some uneasiness. Yesterday, when I was scouting among these hills, I found a little glove—a woman's glove without a doubt, and it led me to mistrust that there might be something else than wolf-herding and cattle-stealing out of place here."

As he spoke, he drew from an inner pocket a brown, lisle-thread glove, at sight of which Harry Foster exclaimed, as he took the glove from Sam's hand:

"Good heavens! that is the very glove, or its mate, that I handed to its fair owner on the plain five days ago!"

"Ye must be mistaken, Harry," remarked Old Tom, looking at the glove with knitted brows.

"I am not, Tom!" persisted the young schoolmaster, not a little excited over the matter. "It is, without doubt, the glove of Diana Moore!"

"Who is Diana Moore?" asked Saddle-King Sam.

Harry told him all he knew of the handsome and daring young huntress they had met on the Dakota plain.

"Then she must either belong here, among these bushrangers, or is a captive," Sam declared. "If she is a captive, then the glove was dropped purposely."

"Ah! see here what I find inside the glove!" suddenly exclaimed Harry, producing a bit of thin, glazed stuff that looked like a piece of the sweat-band of a hat.

The four examined it closely. It had evidently been torn off a larger piece, and that it was taken from the sweat-band of a hat there was no doubt. They also discovered that it was pierced full of tiny holes as if with the point of a pin.

"That gal, Dianar," Old Tom observed, "wore a little white hat, and if that's her glove, then that's a piece o' her hat; and the glove and piece war dropped for a purpose, whether to lead friends or mislead them, I can't say. Them holes mean somethin', surely. See if they don't run in lines and curves that make letters. My ole eyes are good yit on a long reach, but disdain to see little things."

Taking a pin from the lapel of his coat Harry proceeded to enlarge each puncture. This done he made a slight scratch from one hole to the other, and when he had completed his work a mingled cry of surprise and pain escaped his lips.

For Old Tom was right. The tiny dots were set in lines and curves forming letters, and the letters words which Harry read aloud, and which read as follows:

"Am a captive—Bad Lands.

DIANA."

CHAPTER VII.

RATTLER MAKES A RECONNOISSANCE.

"THAT settles it!" exclaimed Tom Rattler, after the young schoolmaster had read the missive, "that little madcap is in the hands o' them wolfish demons! She's dropped that bit o' sweat-band in her glove in hopes it'd be found by friends. It war a clever bit o' work, but I wonder how she ever got the chance to 'dot' them words undetected by her captors?"

"Do you think it could not be a decoy?" questioned Saddle-King Sam, thoughtfully.

"It might be," answered Rattler, "but if 't is, the gal had no hand in it, for, Samuel, she war an angel. I mean to know the hull truth before I leave this devil's nest, and if she's here a captive, I'll add my ole bones to them in that wolf-pen but what's she's rescued!"

"And I'm with you, Rattler!" exclaimed Harry Foster.

"Here, too!" added big Bob Marshall.

"Count me in, also," put in the Saddle-King, "for I assure you I like nothing better than a little excitement."

"A noble quartette o' lily-lipped hummers!" declared Old Tom, his eyes sparkling at the thought of a prospective brush with the bushrangers; "and the very fu'st thing for the Epidemic to do is to reconnoiter the varmints' nest and locate their stronghold, ascertain their number, if possible, and then act 'ordin'ly. And as night'll soon be along to thicken up this fog, I'd better be on the move to once."

Saddle-King consulted his watch. It was four o'clock. The fog showed no sign of lifting.

Having obtained his bearings of the young patrol, Old Tom at once set off to reconnoiter,

Saddle-King Sam, Bob and Harry accompanying him to a point on the south side of the Wolf-Pen where they were to await his return for an hour or two at least.

The old hunter went around the basin and followed the lane along which the cattle-thieves and wolf-herder had come and gone when they fed the wolves. He found it a well-worn road trending off toward the north, and keeping in the bushes, he followed it for nearly a mile when the sound of voices assailed his ears.

Leaving the road, he struck across lots in the direction whence the sound came, and had gone but a short way when a good-sized opening appeared before him. It was another basin, or rather a depression in the earth entirely devoid of vegetation. On one side only was the bank steep, and in this bank, fully fifteen feet high, the scout discovered the home of the bushrangers.

Eight or ten stall-like rooms opening upon the basin had been dug back into the bank. Each one appeared to be about eight feet wide, with a partition of three feet of earth separating each department, and supporting the roof which was a part of the bank. Over the entrance to one of these dug-outs was hung a curtain made of blankets, with a small square hole in the center, evidently to admit light.

Tom could see no sign of life about these rooms, but some distance beyond there seemed to be considerable real life itself, judging by the shouts and yells he heard. By these sounds, he made up his mind the bushrangers were still engaged in branding cattle, and that the entire gang was at the branding-pen. Influenced by this belief, the spirit of adventure possessed him, and he resolved to take a look into the dug-outs.

Moving around the basin, he crept from the bushes to the head of the stairs cut in the bank, and, with the agility of a youth, bounded down the steps. With his hand on his revolver, he advanced to the open end of the first dug-out and looked in. It was a long, narrow room with two bunks at the opposite end. Some articles of clothing hung on pegs driven into the clay walls.

Scarcely stopping, Tom moved on to the next room, glanced in, and finding it deserted also, hastened to the next, and so on, until he came to the one over whose entrance hung the curtain of blankets. Outside he paused and listened. He resolved to enter, and that, too, unannounced. He pulled aside the curtain and glided into the room. As he did so he came in sudden collision with some one and was almost hurled backward from the place.

The curtain fell from its fastenings and the light flooded the excavation. At a glance Rattler saw that the person he had collided with was a woman—a big, raw-boned, snake-eyed, half-breed Indian squaw, who, from force of their collision, was thrown backward half-stunned, falling between two other female forms seated upon a couch at the end of the dug-out.

A cry of pain and anger burst from the lips of this squaw, and was mingled with an exclamation of fear from the others.

It required no words to acquaint the old hunter with the situation. The two females seated upon the couch were both captives—young girls—one of whom was Diana Moore, sure enough! The other to him was a stranger, but a fair, sweet-faced, brown-eyed girl of about Diana's age.

Diana did not recognize the hunter as he advanced toward her, and involuntarily shrunk back. Observing this, Old Tom said:

"Dianar, we found yer glove, you poor child!"

"Then you are a friend?" quickly responded the girl, a light of hope kindling in her eyes.

"Why, to be sure, gal! Don't ye recognize me?" Tom asked; "I'm one o' them three men you met on the plain nighly a week ago."

"Oh, sir, excuse me!" the girl cried; "I do recognize you now! I am a captive here, and so is this poor girl! Oh, save us! save us!"

"Shet yer mouth!" snapped the half-breed squaw, who by this time had recovered from her shock; "shet yer mouth, 'r it won't be good for yer! And you!" she hissed, flashing a murderous look at Old Tom, "you'll be wolf-bait afore an hour!"

As she thus predicted, the squaw attempted to pass Rattler and reach the door; but, seizing her by the arm he held her back, saying, in an assumed fierceness of tone:

"Hold on here, ole Kitty Ellen, or, by the great Rosycrusians, I'll jerk yer arm off at the socket!"

"Let go o' me!" the squaw growled, like a

she-wolf, her eyes blazing with a red fire of rage; "let go o' me 'r I'll yell!"

"Do it if you dare, you ole heifer, and I'll have to choke you purple, though I'm not in the habit o' fightin' weemin! Gals," addressing the two maidens, "take yer things and git ready to fly with me—quick!"

It was evident the squaw had been left to guard the captives, and, true to her trust, regardless of the intruder's threats, she resolved the girls should not escape and attempted to give an alarm by a panther-like series of cries. But Old Tom was ready, for, as she opened her mouth to yell his hand rather roughly closed over her mouth, thus shutting off her screech.

The squaw, however, was plucky and combative, and made a stubborn fight for liberty and breath, and for a while she and the little, old hunter went waltzing around the room in a lively struggle, Tom all the while keeping his hand over her mouth.

"Gals, now's yer chance to git out o' here!" said Old Tom Rattler, "and run like kildeer while I hold this wildcat's bugle shet! I'll be along in a minute. Go up them steps in the bank and keep straight ahead!"

Taking their hats and a blanket each, the girls ran from the dug-out, flew up the steps and were soon out of sight among the bushes.

The squaw, on seeing the girls leave, made a renewed effort to free herself from the iron grip of the hunter, but in vain.

Rattler could have saved himself much trouble and danger by braining the pugnacious savage, but the idea of making war upon women—even a squaw—was contrary to Tom's principles. Nevertheless, he was compelled to handle the half-breed pretty roughly, and he kept his hand over her mouth to prevent her using her lungs until, completely exhausted, she sunk gasping for breath upon the floor.

Then the hunter turned to depart when a shadow darkened the doorway and the lithe figure of an Indian stood before him! The red-skin, however, was more surprised than Rattler, and before he could comprehend the situation, he received a blow from the old mountain tramp's fist that stretched him on the ground. But the blow did not deprive him of the use of his lungs, and as he went down he uttered a wild yell, and would have repeated it but for a kick Tom gave him in the stomach that curled him up speechless on the ground.

Then, with a bound, the hunter cleared the dug-out and started to follow the girls. In his haste he ran a few paces past the steps in the bank, and, as he turned to retrace his steps he saw, not only the squaw coming toward him, yelling like a fury, but a mounted outlaw riding like the wind across the basin, a lasso in his hand.

At the foot of the stairs Tom and the squaw again collided, but, thrusting her aside, he started up the steps. With a panther-like cry, the squaw flew after him, and throwing her arms about his legs, jerked his feet from under him, and together the two rolled to the foot of the stairs! But, in an instant, Tom was on his feet, and kicking himself clear of the desperate woman's embrace, again turned and started up the steps.

But just then the horseman dashed up and drawing rein, swung and launched the lasso in his hand, and with unerring skill, for the noose encircled the form of the hunter and was jerked taut, throwing the old man to his feet, his arms pinioned at his side. And in this manner he was dragged half across the basin when he was pounced upon by half a score of outlaws who had hurried down from the cattle-pen at the first sound of alarm.

Thus Tom Rattler's reconnoissance came to an end, and he was a prisoner in the hands of the Bushrangers of the Bad Lands.

CHAPTER VIII.

QUEEN BELLE.

THE capture of Old Tom put an end to business at the cattle-pens, and in a short time the whole band was gathered about the prisoner. There were at least twenty of the party, five of whom were Indians—atrocious-looking wretches—renegade Sioux.

The man who had lassoed Tom was no other than the "cowboy" who had been Saddle-King Sam's rival for the position of special patrol, the swarthy-faced Lasso Jack. And, almost the first man to congratulate him on his capture of the old intruder, was the burly Enoch Brooks. So Saddle-King was right: the proprietors of Sand Creek Ranch were outlaws and cattle-thieves.

The squaw with whom Sam had had so much trouble, and who was responsible for his cap-

ture dashed into the crowd, furious with rage, and attempted to brain the hunter with a hatchet. She was only prevented from doing so by the interference of her husband, a tall, villainous-looking wretch with but a single eye, who seized her by the shoulder and pushed her back saying, in savage tones:

"Birdie, you wench, what d'ye mean? keep back 'r I'll slap yer muddy face."

"I want to kill him! kill him! kill! kill!" shrieked the frantic tigress, her eyes glassy with rage. "He hit me! slapped me! smothered me! Oh! I want his blood!"

"Go 'long away, Birdie," again commanded her lord and master, as she came dancing forward in her fury to kill the hunter, "g'long off, and stick yer head in the sand and cool yer brain. Fly, Birdie."

"Fool! fool!" shrieked the woman, turning on her husband, "he set the girls free! he set 'em free!"

Lasso Jack quickly ran to the door of the captives' room, and then with an oath affirmed the truth of the woman's words—the girls were gone!

Two men, a white man and red-skin, were at once dispatched in pursuit of the girls, and when the amiable "Birdie" found she could not get a chance to vent her fury on the hunter, she rushed away across the basin and plunged into the hills to aid in hunting down the girls, in hopes, no doubt, of getting some satisfaction out of their recapture.

"Say, ole man," said Captain Dead-Eye, for by this euphonious name was the one-eyed villain addressed, "d'ye realize yer been treadin' on forebiddin ground?"

His words were addressed to Old Tom, who was walking to and fro, his hands tied at his back, within the ring of outlaws surrounding him.

"If ye want to talk with me, stranger," replied Rattler, not the least, to all appearances, disconcerted by his situation, "shoot straight United States langwidge at me and not wolf jargon. I don't understand what you mean by forbidden ground."

"A bold lip betrays a weak brain," sneered Dead-Eye; "but, stranger, if you'll oblige us with your name and yer business here, we'll settle yer case that much sooner. Yawp her out, swift."

"I've no information for you," was Tom's answer.

"He's Old Mum, hisself," said the thwarted outlaw; "if that darned Birdie war here she might throw a leetle light on the matter, and—"

"Hurrah!" suddenly burst from the lips of Lasso Jack, "yonder comes Queen Belle!"

The next instant hands and hats were waving, and a score of voices snouting in wild applause, as a woman, mounted upon a fleet-limbed horse, came dashing down the opening toward the yelling group.

Soon the woman drew rein before them, her face flushed and her eyes sparkling. She was a woman of thirty or thirty-five years of age, with dark eyes and rather prepossessing features; but the expression of her face was cold and almost cruel—in perfect harmony with those of the men who greeted her coming so enthusiastically.

"Just in time, fair Queen of No Man's Land!" exclaimed Lasso Jack, advancing and assisting her to dismount.

"What has happened?" the woman asked.

"We've caught an ole stray interloper—an ole maverick," answered the facetious cattle-thief.

"Ah! a detective—a ranch patrol," the woman observed, in a cold, unfeminine voice.

"He refuses," said Captain Dead-Eye, "to give his handle; perhaps you might recognize him, Queen Belle."

When Old Tom first caught a glimpse of the woman's face, and heard her addressed as "queen," a faint hope sprung up in his breast, for he thought her woman's tendency to the side of mercy might favor him. But when she advanced and confronted him, glaring into his eyes with a cold, searching, unsympathetic gaze, the lines of premature age in her face growing deeper and more rigid, the shadow of sin on her brow growing darker, hope vanished from his heart. He saw that the Queen of No Man's Land, as he had heard her called, was a fit companion of the irrepressible "Birdie."

Even while the woman stood searching the face of Tom Rattler, as if trying to connect it with some incident of the past, Captain Dead-Eye rattled off the story of the old man's intrusion and the escape of the girls. But if the woman heard him at all, she was unmoved by his story. Suddenly, however, a light of recog-

nition flashed in her eyes, and turning to Dead-Eye she said, in a firm, positive tone:

"That man is Kit Bandy, the Mountain Detective!"

An exclamation of surprise and indignation burst from the lips of the outlaws.

A grim smile passed over Rattler's face, and he glanced around at the faces turned toward him as if half-expecting to see the face of his friend—the real Kit Bandy, among them—a thing that had happened once under like circumstances.

"Are you sure, Queen Belle, it is that ole nosey, Bandy?" questioned Lasso Jack, as if he had some doubts.

"It is Kit Bandy," declared the woman with emphasis, "and he is one of three men living I long to make feel the vengeance of a woman he has persecuted. He must not escape from No Man's Land, else it will be 'good-by' to Captain Dead-Eye's wolf business and our cattle-raising."

"What is the pleasure o' the Queen o' No Man's Land?" asked Enoch Brooks.

"No voice comes from the Wolf-Pen," answered the woman, a diabolical gleam in her eye.

"The wolf-pen! the wolf-pen!" shouted Captain Dead-Eye; "Kit Bandy has received his sentence. Away with him to the wolf-pen!"

A shudder ran through the old hunter's frame as his thoughts reverted to that horrible den of ravenous beasts. Yet he asked no mercy at the hands of the murderous band. He was doomed to an awful fate because mistaken for another—for Kit Bandy—and yet he had the courage to face death rather than deny it in hopes of mercy.

By ruthless hands the old hunter was hurried off toward the wolf-pen, Captain Dead-Eye and Lasso Jack leading the way, while the heartless Queen Belle, of No Man's Land, retired to her chamber in the hillside, gloating over her revengeful edict that sent the supposed mountain-detective to his death.

CHAPTER IX.

SADDLE-KING SAM TAKES A HAND.

PATIENTLY Saddle-King Sam, Bob Marshall and Harry Foster awaited the return of the old scout, and when a couple of hours had passed and he came not they became impatient and uneasy. Night was coming on apace, and unless he should return soon they were afraid he would be unable to find them in the foggy darkness.

Finally their ears were assailed by a sound that increased their uneasiness and created no little fear in their minds. It was the sound of excited voices that appeared to be approaching the wolf-pen.

Saddle-King proposed an investigation, and the three crept down to the place from whence they had witnessed, that day, the death of the steer. Glancing across the basin, they beheld a sight that almost chilled the blood in their veins. It was a score of outlaws standing on the rim of the basin with Old Rattler a prisoner in their midst.

"My God!" exclaimed Sam, "they have captured the old man, and now mean to throw him into that pit!"

"Surely they are not inhuman, Halliday," said Harry.

"Inhuman!" replied the young patrol; "why, man! there is nothing human about such a gang—they're bloody fiends! They'll throw Old Tom in there alive, unless we take steps to prevent it, as quick as they would a dead ox."

"Then let us be about it," exclaimed Bob Marshall.

"But what can we do against such odds?" questioned Foster.

"Crawl around near to them and then make a dash," answered Sam; "but stop! I see an Ingin's coming round this way. Let us see what the varmint is up to. He's carrying something in his arms."

The red-skin walked briskly around the basin toward them, and as he approached they saw he carried a rope and a chunk of fresh meat.

On the edge of the basin, between them and the bank, he stopped not over ten feet from them. One end of the rope he made fast to the meat which he at once lowered into the pit, setting up a lugubrious howling and barking as he did so.

Despite the feast the wolves had enjoyed that day, they seemed more ravenous than ever. The presence of the outlaws above had drawn them out, and they were surging along the bank, leaping into the air, yelping, fighting and snarling. But the moment the Indian succeed-

ed in making himself heard, the frantic pack broke away and came swarming across the basin toward him with glaring eyes and opened jaws. They seemed to understand the call.

The Indian swung the meat just out of their reach, and soon the whole pack was bunched in a seething mass under the tempting bait, a fetid odor rising from their bodies and permeating the air almost sickening the trio in the bushes.

The object the Indian had in view soon became manifest. As soon as the wolves had been attracted from the opposite side, the three watchers saw Tom Rattler's form lowered into the basin by means of a rope around his middle. The hunter's hands and feet were securely bound, but an outlaw slipped down another rope and released the bonds that fettered his feet and removed the rope from his waist.

As soon as the outlaw had been assisted from the pit, Dead-Eye waved his hand to the Indian to remove his bait, which he at once did, and the wolves ceased their noise.

Then a noise was made by the bushrangers to draw the animals back to the side where Rattler stood.

The crisis was coming, and Saddle-King Sam could remain inactive no longer. The feeling of rage and indignation that had been growing within his breast found expression in a desperate oath, and then, like a panther, his tall, lithe figure shot through the bushes to where the Indian still stood, and, dealing the red-skin a terrific blow on the neck, sent him reeling backward over the bank into the wolf pit.

A cry of horror pealed from the savage's lips as he sunk into the midst of the ravenous beasts whose appetites he had been tempting until they had become frantic. But he was a powerful, agile fellow, and with foot and fist he beat off the beasts and ran like a deer along the wall of the basin, the wolves swarming at his heels and circling in before him to cut off his retreat, for they were no respecters of persons.

But Saddle-King's diversion had not been made in time to draw entire attention from Tom Rattler. Fully a score of the hundred wolves had been attracted by the outlaws' call, and were already moving across the arena when the Indian was knocked into the pit. They had caught sight of the old hunter and started in swift pursuit, Tom having started on a run along the wall of the pen toward the south.

Saddle-King Sam ran along the bank shouting to Tom in hopes of encouraging him to renewed exertions; but with his hands tied at his back the old man could make little speed, and, seeing the wolves were rapidly closing in upon him, the daring young patrol deliberately leaped over the bank into the wolf pit, and, with a revolver in each hand, ran down across the arena, firing upon the animals as he went.

Nor were Bob Marshall and Harry Foster idle. With their Winchesters they opened on the wolves also, and for a while the crash of their rifles and the crack of Sam's revolvers fairly stirred the fog around the wolf-pen. To this din was added the yells and shouts of the outlaws, the yelping and snarling of the wolves, and the horrible screams of the doomed savage into whose living flesh the beasts were now sinking their burning fangs.

Both sight and sound were frightful, appalling, but like veterans Bob and Harry stood their grounds.

In the excitement consequent upon the fall of their red friend into the wolf-pen, the bushrangers rushed off in a body to his assistance, leaving Old Tom for the time being to his fate. But the sudden appearance of Saddle-King Sam in the inclosure hurrying to the aid of the hunter, called for a division of their party, and several men were at once started back around the basin to see that the supposed detective and his friend did not escape alive.

The young patrol soon reached Rattler's side, and drawing his knife severed his bonds. By this time the wolves were so close upon them that Sam was compelled to beat them off with his now empty revolvers.

Rattler snatched up the jaw-bone of an ox and began laying around him with the desperation of a Samson; and in this manner they beat back the wolves, retreating toward the wall of the basin as they did so.

Bob and Harry were now compelled to cease firing on the pack through fear of killing their friends; but they turned their rifles upon the outlaws who were running along the opposite side, firing their revolvers at Tom and Harry. But the distance was so great, and the murky shadows now so deep from approaching night, that their shots had little if any effect upon the enemy.

In the mean time half the wolves that had followed the Indian, had joined those pressing so hard upon Tom and the young patrol.

The young homesteader and schoolmaster saw their friends standing with their backs to the wall fighting like Trojans, but suddenly both of them were seen to go down in the dark shadows of the bank, while a black billow of frantic beasts swept up and buried them from sight.

"It's all up with our friends, Harry!" said Bob Marshall, a shudder of horror convulsing his frame; "come, for God's sake!"

And turning, they took up Tom and Saddle-King's rifles that had been left with them, and fled into the hills from sight of the sickening horrors of that terrible place, and the atrocious fiends that were speeding around the basin toward them.

Half an hour later night fell black as Egypt.

CHAPTER X. AN OLD MAZEPPA.

LIKE Bob and Harry, the outlaws saw Old Tom and his friend disappear, and they, too, believed they had been borne down by the wolves, and a shout of delight burst from their lips. But on reaching the scene of the wolfish tumult, they were not a little surprised and disappointed to find they were mistaken—that the two men were not dead, but had taken refuge in a wolf burrow under the bank and were holding the beasts at bay without any apparent effort.

And such was really the situation of Old Tom and the gallant Saddle-King. More to escape the bullets of the outlaws than the fangs of the beasts, they had crowded themselves into a spacious wolf burrow which led back some ten feet into the bank. Sam went first and then Old Tom followed, entering backward and with his jawbone beating back the disappointed beasts that attempted to follow them in.

Finally Sam passed Tom one of his revolvers, which he had reloaded from his belt, and the hunter began deadly work among the wolves. As fast as one weapon was emptied, another was passed along, and the havoc being made among the animals fairly enraged the outlaws, who, with but a few feet of earth separating them, stood on the bank overhead listening to the sullen, pent-up crash of the revolvers.

Despite their critical situation Old Tom finally found time to remark:

"Sam Saddle-King, this is a leeble the closest place I've been squoze into since hugged by a grizzly b'ar; and if it hadn't been for you, boy, I reckon I'd be prancia' round over this sink distributed insides the jackets o' them kiyotes."

"Our friends, Bob and Harry," said Sam, "put in some good shots in your behalf, also; but I hope the boys got away before the outlaws got around there. As to our situation, it's not the safest or most comfortable. If them bushwhackers should dig the bank down we'd be unearthed. But, Tom, your reconnaissance, I presume, was altogether a failure."

"Not by a jugful," responded the old hunter, as he whacked a wolf over the head with his jawbone, "it war a tumultuous success, 'ceptin' this little affair in this wolf-nest. Boy, I found the varmints' dug-outs and, seein' no one 'bout, I slipped in to take a look at the furniture. As I bounced inter one room I collided with a half-breed Ingin squaw, and if I'd slit her weazen then I wouldn't be in this perdicament. But I never made war on womin, and let her live; but, Sam, the gal, Dianar Moore, war thar a captive, nor she wasn't alone. Thar war another screamin' pretty gal thar a prisoner, also. I sot the gals free and told 'em to hump thar'selves into the Hills and I'd foller; but right thar I slipped a cog, Samuel; that squaw put in an objection, and I had to bank up her mouth with one o' my paws to keep her from yellin'. We had it round thar 'bout three minutes like twin cyclones in a wrastle, but the squaw finally run short o' breath and fell like a wilted lily to the floor. Then an Ingin warrior put in an appearance, and before he could say 'Waugh!' I curled him and then struck the air for other quarters."

"But the squaw by this time had recovered her feet, and, with a series of yells and shrieks, come for me like a long-lost lover. Between her and a mounted scoundrel that rode up with a lasso in his hand, I was roped in like a steer, and the Epidemic quarantined."

"'Bout this time up dashed a white woman on a pantin' boss, and she was greeted as Queen Belle, o' No Man's Land. She war a rather pretty tigress, and the moment she sot eyes on me, by the great Rosycrusians! she declared I war Kit Bandy, the Mountain Detective, and forthwith I war sentenced to the wolf-pen,

and—wal, here I be. Boy, we've struck a nest o' devils, sure."

Meanwhile the outlaws were trying to devise some means by which the supposed Kit Bandy and his unknown friend could be dislodged from under the bank before they had killed off all their wolves.

The discovery of enemies in their midst filled the villains' minds with no little apprehension, and they felt certain that the death of the intruders was all that would now save themselves from ultimate destruction.

The slip made in the execution of the old man, the terrible death of the Indian, and the coming of night, enraged and confused them. Captain Dead-Eye was decidedly furious. It was he who, while hiding from justice in the Bad Lands, had discovered the natural advantages the place possessed as a refuge and breeding-ground for wolves. It was his genius and enterprise that led to the organization of the band some years before, and it was through his management the business had been carried forward to a financial success. So it made the enterprising scoundrel wrothy to have his business jeopardized by interlopers, and he resolved no man should escape to reveal his whereabouts.

In this he was heartily seconded by the Sand Creek ranchers, Lasso Jack and Enoch Brooks, and their contingent of red-skin outlaws who shared with the Wolf-Herders the desolate seclusion of the Bad Lands.

It was first proposed to cust the supposed Bandy and his friend by digging away the bank, but as night was approaching, they concluded to postpone the job until morning. They knew the men would fight to the death, and that the darkness would be all in their favor if they—the outlaws—undertook to dislodge them then. They had no fears of the two escaping unseen. The wolves would closely guard their retreat under the bank, while a guard could be left to watch that they did not dig their way out.

The matter being thus settled, Lasso Jack and six men were detailed to watch by the wolf-pen during the night, while the others started on their return to headquarters.

When they reached there, they found "Queen Belle" weeping in hysterical rage. The news of Bandy's escape from the wolves by the aid of a friend, and of the presence of other men in the Hills, and the failure to recapture the girls up to that time, had wrought her feelings up to such a pitch that her rage was melted into tears by the white heat of her ungovernable temper.

"Don't worry, Miss Belle," Dead-Eye said, consolingly; "that man Bandy and his friends will never escape to reveal the secrets o' No Man's Land. As to them gals, don't worry a bit. My dusky mate, Birdie, is still out in search of them, as are several men, also, and when she comes back the gals'll come with her. Birdie's as good as a bloodhound on a trail, Birdie is."

"I fear it was all a mistake bringing that Diana Moore here," Queen Belle observed. "Those intruders have undoubtedly followed her captors here, led by that miserable old wretch, Kit Bandy."

Thus the "queen" and the "captain" conversed for some minutes, when they were finally interrupted by Enoch Moore, who entered the room, saying:

"Captain Dead-Eye, thar's somethin' wrong just over in the brush. I hear groans. It may be Birdie."

Dead-Eye and Queen Belle arose and stepped outside and listened, when, true enough, they heard a sound very much like a human groan.

"That's not Birdie's voice, I can tell ye that," observed Dead-Eye; "it's a man's groan—some o' the boys 've been hurt and need help. Here, Yelp-ee," addressing a little, weazen-faced Indian, "come with me and we'll inquire into that groanin' business."

Guided by the sounds, for it was now dark, the two approached the sufferer, and this they found: a lean, long-limbed mule whose bridle-reins were down and fouled in a bunch of dead sage-brush, and upon whose back was lashed the prostrate form of a man who seemed to be in great agony.

The man lay face downward, his head toward the mule's tail, his legs extended forward and downward under the mule's neck, where they were tied together at the ankles. A lariat had been wound 'round the animal's body, passing over that of the man a dozen times, while his arms, hugging the mule's body, were tied together under its belly.

The position was a most torturing one, and to the outlaws it was quite evident that the unknown Mazeppa was nearly dead.

"Ho here, stranger!" shouted Captain Dead-Eye, "what's the go with you?"

A groan answered him.

"Yelp-ee," said Dead-Eye, addressing his red-skin companion, "that sounds like a last wail, don't it?"

"Ugh! he nearly mighty dead," responded Yelp-ee, walking around the mule as cautiously as though fearing some unknown danger.

"Say, stranger, what's this mean? Who are you?" asked Dead-Eye, stepping close to the man.

"It's the—devilish—work o'—ranchmen!" was the answer, given with apparently painful efforts; "for God's sake—ontie me—water! water! I'm turnin' up!"

It was but the work of a moment to remove the lariat from the man's body and untie his hands and feet. Then Dead-Eye said:

"Now, lay still, ole Mazeppa, and we'll run ye into camp and see if salt-peter 'll save ye. Lead on the mule, Yelp-ee."

The Indian took the reins and led the way toward camp, the stranger groaning at every step, as he still lay prostrate on the mule's back, his long legs dangling in the air.

Reaching the dug-outs, the man was assisted to the ground, but his limbs refused to support his body and he tumbled over on the sand in a heap.

Dead-Eye and Yelp-ee assisted him into a dug-out and seated him upon the floor. Queen Belle brought in a light and the crowd took a look at the old Mazeppa. He was an elderly man, though there was no telling his age by his face, for it was literally covered with dust and dirt. He was a tall, angular fellow, with long arms, a scrawny neck, a big mouth and small gray eyes. His head was bare and covered with long, scant locks of thin, grizzled, unkempt hair. Altogether, he was a sorry and ludicrous-looking specimen of a man.

Gradually the circulation was restored to the fellow's limbs and body; and, finally, he had so far recovered as to become somewhat interested in his whereabouts. Raising his head and gazing around for the first time, he inquired:

"Where am I, anyhow?"

"Safe for the present," answered Queen Belle, her dark, lusterless eyes searching every lineament of his face that now appeared grotesque in its homeliness and dirt; "but who are you we find in such a plight?"

"Well," answered the man, averting his gaze and wringing his bony fingers till the joints cracked, "if I'm the same man I war once, I'm Nicholas Lamb, and if I am, I'm a son-of-a-gun if I don't make somebody sweat for this unholy persecution. I've just been 'bout crucified—no Christian martyr ever suffered more and held on to his wind. It's enough to make an angel bawl."

"Well, where are you from, Mr. Lamb?" the woman asked, showing some impatience and incredulity.

"Riginally from Kaintucky, forty years ago," the old man answered, all the while rubbing his limbs, "but quite recently from other places. 'Bout four months ago I jumped a humsteader's forfeited claim down on the Keya Paha. The 'riginal 'steader 'd taken sick and hadn't been on his claim for nighly a solid year, and I thought I see'd my chance for some land and loped onto the claim. But I hadn't fairly got settled when along comes a gang o' 'steaders—neighbors, by gracious! and they showed me a rope with a noose on one end, and informed me I could either take a walk or stretch hemp—that no claim-jumpers—'specially jumpers o' sick men's claims—had ever been permitted to live in that atmosphere. So I took a walk—that is, I rid off up here into Montanny calculatin' to hire out on a ranch."

"I went up to the P. V. L. Ranch and axed for a job. They looked me over s'piciously and told me I looked more like a cow-thief than a puncher, and again I war requested to move on or I'd git into trouble. I moved. I thought I'd strike south and try Sand Creek Ranch for a lay-out; but before ever I got thar I war met by four cowboys who swore I war a mule-thief. I denied the allegation and defied the alligators, but they war too plentiful for me, and so they took me, pulled the saddle off'n my mule, rolled me in a mud-hole, then tied me an' the mule together—heads and tails—'course I war on its back 's ye found me—stuck a cactus under the critter's tail, and sent us adrift. Whish! I know that mule flung a hundred miles ahind it afore it stopped runnin', and kickin' and humpin' its back; and so, fur two days and one night I know of, I've been ridin' round as you found me."

"And haven't you any idea whar ye now are?"

asked Enoch Brooks, who had patiently listened to Lamb's story.

"Not the least," answered the old man, "but I s'pose ye'r humsteaders, seein' a good-lookin' feminine's around. At any rate, I seem to 've found friends, and if I ever git over this ride, dumb me if I ar'n't goin' to turn 'venger. I'll make somebody think the lamb's changed to a roarin' lion. I've got snap, I hev, and I'm goin' to snap. I've been driv' around long as I keer 'bout, and I'm goin' to locate."

"Suppose I inform you we are not homesteaders?" said Brooks.

"Then ye must be ranchers," replied Lamb.

"Nor ranchmen neither."

"Don't make a darned sarned bit o' difference to me if ye'r pirates," responded the old man, "so's you'll give me a show. I've blood in my optics from now on."

Nicholas Lamb was subjected to a rigid cross-questioning in relation to himself and his presence there by Captain Dead-Eye and his friends, and the answers given were so prompt and candid, without equivocation or contradiction, that the wily outlaws were fully convinced that he was a prairie vagabond whose natural instincts and inclinations were such as would make him a useful member of their band.

However, the outlaws did not make their real character known to him, nor did they decide to accept him into fellowship until they had sounded him deeper. At length their attention was drawn from him altogether by entrance of two men with the startling information that "Red Hawk" and "Bell Mouth," the Indian and white man who had been first sent in pursuit of the escaped girls, had been found dead in the Hills a mile or two from camp.

This news renewed the uneasiness of the outlaws and the suppressed fury of Queen Belle, and if Nick Lamb had had a single doubt as to the character of those with whom he was sojourning, that doubt now must have been removed.

"Can it be," exclaimed the white-faced Queen Belle, "that that lynx-eyed wretch, Kit Bandy, has escaped unseen and slain the scouts—two of our best and bravest men?"

"I don't believe Bandy and his pard has escaped," replied Captain Dead-Eye. "There are two of their friends at large in the Hills, or were, at dusk, and they may have assassinated our scouts. But it will be all the worse for the intruders at the end."

"Kit Bandy 'round did ye say?" piped out Old Nick Lamb.

"Yes; what do you know of him?" demanded Queen Belle, turning upon him with flashing eyes.

"He war at the 'P. V. L.' when I war thar," answered Lamb, "and an ornery, measly-lookin' ole whelp he is. He war the very welt that said I looked like a Maverick-brander, and I said to myself then—Jee-whillikins! that war the real screech o' a paint'er!"

This last observation was called forth by the sound of a shrill, sharp voice from without. It seemed to come from the bank over the dug-outs and hurrying outside, Dead-Eye demanded:

"Who's thar—wildcat or paint'er?"

"It's me, a poor, lone, lost woman," came the shrill voice again, piercing the darkness like a dagger; "and I seek rest and shelter for my weary body!"

"What in thunder ye doin' here?" asked Dead-Eye a little suspiciously.

"Do not taunt me, stranger," the answer came down; "I'm the lawful wife of a cruel husband who deserted my bed and board, and gonied away flirtin' with other weemin; but I'm on his trail, and if God spares me I'll run him to Jericho but what I get him! I am Sabina Ellen Bandy, the honest and virtuous consort of the deceitful Old Kit Bandy!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE TIGRESS SHOWS HER TEETH.

THE very mention of Kit Bandy's name threw "Queen Belle" into a towering rage, and had the woman on the bank, claiming to be the old detective's wife, been within reach, she would have torn her to pieces without mercy.

"Looke here," said Dead-Eye to the furious woman, "Kit Bandy's wife aren't to blame for what the old sinner done to you; in fact, she seems to be as hot to'rds him as you are."

The "queen" finally cooled down, and having accepted Dead-Eye's views as probably correct, she went up and conducted Sabina Bandy down the steps and into the dug-out.

Dead-Eye and Enoch Brooks followed them in, eager to get a look at the "wronged wife;" but at the first glimpse of her face a look of dis-

appointment swept over their faces, and they exchanged significant glances.

The old woman was clad in a calico dress. A light, threadbare shawl hung over her shoulders. A red handkerchief was tied around her head low on her wrinkled forehead, and over this she wore an old, flaring sun-bonnet that contrasted oddly with the big, shiny ear-drops that dangled at her ears. Her face was wrinkled and colorless as parchment, and wore a sour, yet haggard and weary expression.

Even the curiosity of Old Nicholas Lamb to see the woman was so great that despite the numbness of his legs, he rose to his feet and gazed at her with brazen effrontery, saying as he did so:

"And you say you're the lawful wife o' Kit Bandy?"

"Yes, I do!" declared the woman with emphasis, her eyes snapping, and her slight form trembling; "deny it if you dare!"

"And you say you are here hunting your husband?" Queen Belle observed, as she gazed with a look of mingled mistrust and pity on the old woman.

"That's exactly what I'm here for," Sabina answered.

"How do you know he is here?" questioned the cunning female outlaw.

"Is he here?" Sabina exclaimed.

"No matter whether he is, or is not," Queen Belle responded; "what led you to look for him in No Man's Land?"

"My desire to find him," was the reply. "He has wronged me. He won my maiden heart and then deserted me when the bloom began to fade from my cheeks, and the luster from my eyes. But I have followed him for days and weeks and months. From camp to camp in the mountains, from ranch to ranch on the plains have I trailed him. At a ranch over to the westward I learned that he and some friends had departed a few days previous for the Bad Lands, and in spite of the ranchmen's protests I followed on, determined—"

"Do you know what he started to the Bad Lands for?" interrupted Queen Belle.

"I did not know then," Sabina replied, "but I mistrust now what he sought here. Since I have looked upon your comely face, your beautiful form, I am led to believe that he came here to win your love, for he is a heartless flirt—"

"You miserable ole wretch!" burst indignantly from the lips of the suddenly enraged "Queen," "hush your lips about Kit Bandy winning my affections!"

Dead-Eye and Enoch Brooks burst into laughter in which they were joined by Old Nick Lamb.

"Laugh, you heartless wretches at the woes of a poor old woman!" cried Sabina, turning with flashing eyes on the men; "you have no souls or you'd have sympathy for me."

"Well, to make it plain," said Queen Belle, "your gay old deceiver of a husband has been here, and tried to run away with two of our girls, but not with me."

"Two!" shrieked Sabina, "as if one at a time wasn't enough! Merciful Redeemer! will justice never overtake Kit Bandy?"

"Yes, ma'am," answered Dead-Eye, "you're likely to be a lone widder before mornin'. Kit was cooped up in a wolf-den over here, and for all I know's dead now."

A groan escaped the old woman's lips; she clasped her hands together and staggered back against the wall.

"Say, old woman," spoke up dirty-faced Nick Lamb, in a cold-blooded and cruel way, "I've a heart in me bigger'n a bull's head, and if your man Kit gits kilt I'll agree to husband you for better or wuss."

Sabina started, and, with a look of tragic scorn upon her wrinkled face, cried out:

"Begone, vile mocker! decrepit ole hyena!"

"P'izen scorpions! she spits like a tiger-cat!" exclaimed the old vagabond, while Dead-Eye gave utterance to a low whistle.

The sound of excited voices approaching the dug-outs at this moment arrested the attention of the outlaws, and Old Sabina was for the time being neglected.

"What on 'arth can be the matter now?" exclaimed Enoch Brooks, stepping outside the dug-out.

"My God!" cried Queen Belle, half-despondingly, "it does seem to me as if something dreadful is going to happen!"

"The Queen o' No Man's Land shouldn't let her courage run down," Dead-Eye remarked, "jist when it's needed the most, if she'd git even with her enemies."

Before the woman could reply, three men en-

tered the room abreast and stopped just inside the door.

A cry burst from the lips of Captain Dead-Eye and his friends at the sight presented.

Two of the three men were outlaws—one of them being Lasso Jack. The third was a tall, athletic youth, whose face and breast were covered with blood from a wound on the head. His garments were torn; he was hatless; his long, brown hair was tossed in disorder about his head; his hands were bound at his back—he was a prisoner.

"We got one o' the foxes," exclaimed Lasso Jack, as the three halted in the dug-out, "and he's one o' the most desirous catches of all. Look! what say you to it, Queen Belle?"

A wild, hysterical laugh burst from the woman's lips at sight of the tall prisoner before her, and for a few moments it seemed as if she would go into convulsions. She ran to and fro, clapping and wringing her hands, laughing and crying by turns—lashing herself into a frenzy of fiendish delight. Finally she paused before the tall prisoner, and, with her lithe form swaying to and fro like the poised head and neck of a serpent, her eyes gleaming with a greenish-red light, she hissed out:

"At last! Oh, joy! joy! It is Saddle-King Sam, the lover of Zoe Randall! His skill with the cattle whip this scar on my hand bears witness! For this sweet hour have I been waiting—dying, almost, to dip my hand—this whip-scarred hand—in his life-blood! Oh, sweet revenge! It is my time now, Sam Halliday, to strike, and I mean to strike to kill!"

CHAPTER XII.

A DEADLY BLOW.

IT was Saddle-King Sam, indeed; that stood a prisoner in the outlaws' dug-out; and it was the sight of his handsome face that threw Queen Belle into a paroxysm of towering rage. An outlaw stood on either side of him, his arm linked into the prisoner's to prevent the possibility of escape. And one of those outlaws was Jack Rubell—Lasso Jack—the man who had contested with him in the stockmen's meeting for the place of Range Patrol.

When the youth found himself in the presence of the woman outlaw, Queen Belle, he knew no mercy would be shown him, and from that moment expected none, for he recognized in her face that of the would-be assassin of Zoe Randall, the notorious Belle Rankin. But if he felt any fear of the woman, he did not show it, but stood erect, unmoved, defiant.

And it was this apparent indifference to her presence that provoked the beautiful tigress all the more, and determined to make some impression upon his fears, she drew a glittering dagger from its leather sheath, and, flashing it before him, exclaimed:

"Yes, Sam Halliday, the day you so dextrously struck, with your whip, from my hand the revolver with which I would have slain Zoe Randall, I swore I would live to kill you! I mean to keep my oath! One by one I am paying the debts I owe. Henry Randall has paid the penalty of his insult to me, and his proud niece—your affianced wife, Sam Halliday—knows the strength of Belle Rankin's oaths. Oh! how I have waited for this hour! I have hoped and prayed that the dashing Range Patrol would come this way."

"Oh, mercy! mercy!" suddenly exclaimed Old Sabina Bandy, passing around the crowd toward the door, "let me get out or I'll faint and drop in a swoon!"

No one offered objection to her going out, but she had no sooner reached the open air than she turned back into the dug-out as if drawn there by some irresistible fascination.

Saddle-King Sam and his captors stood with their backs to the door, and their shadows completely covered the old woman, to whom no attention was being given. But suddenly Saddle-King felt a hand touch his, which were still tied at his back. He felt a slight pressure on his bonds, then he felt the cords relax, and he instinctively realized that his fetters had been severed—that in the old woman he had a friend. But he stood still, keeping his hands at his back to await further developments.

Old Sabina stepped in behind the little Indian, Yelp-ee, who stood on the right and in front of one of Sam's captors, his little black, snaky eyes glowing as he watched for the blow of Queen Belle's dagger that was to end the life of the Young Range Patrol.

Queen Belle took a fiendish delight in taunting her intended victim of his helplessness and her power. She tried, by every means her mad brain could conceive, to provoke the defiant

stalwart youth into even a shadow of fear; but failing in this, she finally exclaimed:

"Then die!"

And with a spring like a tigress toward Sam, she struck full at his breast with her dagger. But the result of the blow was entirely different from that intended; as the glittering blade descended, Sabina Bandy, who had been watching every movement of the woman, gave the Indian standing in front of her a quick shove forward between Sam and Queen Belle, and the keen blade was driven to the guards into the red-skin's neck.

Before the blow could be repeated—before the knife, driven tight into the muscle and tendons of the neck, could be withdrawn—before any one could realize what had happened—while Yelp-ee's cry of death was still upon his lips, Queen Belle was seized by the shoulders and hurled violently back against the wall by the hand of Old Sabina.

At the same time the bent form of the vagabond, Nicholas Lamb, straightened up to its full height, and seemed to have suddenly become possessed of the spirit of a fighting devil, for he landed a terrific blow in the face of Dead-Eye, felling that worthy to the ground like an ox. This was followed up by landing Enoch Brooks a thump on the neck that completely paralyzed the burly cattle-thief's body, and then with a lunge the old Mazeppa made toward the door striking right and left like a madman.

By this time all was wild confusion, in the midst of which a pistol rung out once—twice—thrice, and with each report, Old Sabina uttered a short, sharp yelp which, under any other circumstances, would have been most amusing.

As for Saddle-King Sam, he was not idle by any means. The moment he felt his bonds severed, he realized he had a friend in the old woman whom he really supposed was one of the outlaw gang, but before he could decide just what course to pursue, Queen Belle struck the blow that brought on the conflict. His eyes were on Nicholas Lamb when that worthy struck Dead-Eye and Enoch Brooks, and taking the cue from him, he bounded back with the quickness of a cat and struck Lasso Jack a blow on the back of the neck, knocking the villain forward upon his face. In the mean time, Old Sabina had taken care of his other captor, and an Indian or two, also; while the long-armed Nicholas Lamb swept his way like a cyclone to the door and bounded out into the night.

To say the least, the outlaws were taken completely by surprise. Scarcely more than thirty seconds had elapsed between the time Queen Belle had struck the first blow and the last one dealt by Nicholas Lamb, so that before the outlaws could comprehend the situation they were all down in a heap, some of them dead.

As for Saddle-King Sam he was, also, surprised, though most happily, in that he found that Nicholas Lamb, whom he supposed to be an outlaw, was acting in concert with the old woman in his behalf. But he could not understand why they had befriended him, for their presence there among the outlaws was sufficient evidence of their being a part of the gang.

The moment Nicholas Lamb cleared the room he grasped Sam by the arm saying, a little excitedly:

"Come, boy, let's git!"

"Yes, go quick!" said the old woman, who came up at this juncture, "all's well, pard—meet ye on the creek!"

Having thus spoken, the woman vanished in the darkness, and arm in arm Nicholas Lamb and the Young Patrol hurried across the opening and entered the brush-clad hills.

But long before they were under cover, Queen Belle and her thunderstruck friends had regained their feet and the use of their vocal powers, and the latter they used in a frantic manner, at the same time firing revolvers into the air to raise an alarm, for fully two-thirds of the band were still absent at the wolf-pen and in the hills.

So rapidly had the events of the last hour, in which Saddle-King Sam had been a participant, crowded upon each other that the Young Patrol could scarcely comprehend his situation, and as soon as they had reached the hills, and his friend had declared his escape an assured fact, he ventured to say:

"Old friend, I'll be blowed if I ar'n't pretty badly mixed up! I don't understand how I happen to have friends among enemies."

"I reckon a little confusion reigns in that tiger-nest," Lamb responded, "for they got hit mighty suddint and hard. But, young man, that woman—that superb tigress isn't struck on your beauty, eh?"

"Three months ago, I thwarted her attempt

to kill a young woman against whom she had a spite, and so engendered her deadly hatred," Sam explained. "But, stranger, I want to know why you and that old woman aided me—you surely do not belong to that band."

"Not much, boy," responded Lamb; "I ar-riv' there just to-night in a way that threw them varlets off their guard. I'd skeersly got the cramps out o' my limbs when that old lady ar-riv', and shortly after her came yerself and escort. But, boy, I heard the varmints say they'd have Kit Bandy soon. What did they mean?"

"They have mistaken Tom Rattler, the hunter, for Kit Bandy, the detective and mountaineer."

"Wal," said Old Nicholas, with a chuckle, slapping Sam familiarly on the shoulder, "that's the best joke in ten States on that old buccaneer, Tom Rattler, and a better one on that tigress, Queen Belle, in takin' the old hunter for Kit Bandy."

"Why a joke?" asked Halliday, a sudden thought flashing through his brain.

"Beca'se I, Nicholas Lamb, am the original Ka-ristopher Ko-lumbus Bandy!"

CHAPTER XIII.

KIT BANDY'S MISSION TO THE BAD LANDS.

SADDLE-KING SAM was not wholly surprised by his old friend's revelation, for all of a sudden it struck him, by a remark the old fellow made, that he was Kit Bandy. But when assured of the fact, he stopped short, grasped the detective's hand, saying:

"God bless your heart, Kit Bandy! I am rejoiced to meet you! I have heard of you, and have already witnessed your skill as a fighter. You're an old dandy cyclone!"

"Thanks, Samuel, thanks," replied Old Kit; "but now, if you'll tell me something about my ole, ancient friend, Tommy Rattler—what trouble you left him in, I'd be pleased to give him a lift."

Saddle-King Sam briefly narrated the story of his meeting with Rattler and his young friends, and of the hunter's capture, and their adventures in the wolf-pen.

"But how did you git caught, Sam?" Bandy asked.

"We tunneled out," Sam answered; "with my knife I dug a hole up through the bank, cutting steps, or foot-holds, as I went. It required less than an hour to complete the hole ready for a dash. We knew the outlaws were watching near, but trusting to the intense gloom and the noise made by the wolves to conceal our movements and drown whatever noise we might make, I took the lead and crept out upon the bank. But I had not yet risen to my feet when I was knocked half-senseless by a blow on the head, and set upon by several men and made prisoner."

"Of course Old Tom must have known what befell me, and being unable to render assistance remained below. An outlaw went up and fired three or four shots down into the hole, and for all I know, the heroic old man was killed. If he was, however, the outlaws themselves are not aware of it, for men were still left there on guard. As luck would have it, while digging the tunnel, I took off my cartridge-belt and handed it to Tom, along with my revolvers and knife, and, if alive, he has the weapons to defend himself with."

"Well, he'll do it, Sam," Old Kit declared, "for the likes o' Tom Rattler on a fight isn't this side of his birthday. By the ram's horn o' Joshua! it will be a delightful moment to me when I can grasp the hand o' that tumultuous old buccaneer, and—zip!"

There was a flash in the bushes before them, and a bullet cut close to Bandy's head, while the report of a pistol rung out through the murky night.

Quickly snatching a revolver that he had surreptitiously appropriated while in the outlaws' dug-out from his pocket, Bandy fired at the spot where he had seen the flash. But as there was no response it was evident that his shot was futile as that of the assassin, and after listening awhile, and hearing nothing more of the lurking foe, they moved on, shaping their course in the direction of the wolf-pen.

It was their purpose to aid Old Tom Rattler if the hunter was still in need of earthly assistance.

Owing to the extreme darkness it was with difficulty that they made their way through the Hills, and it required all the care and skill of both to keep their course. At length, however, they came within hearing of the noisy wolves, and then they had no further difficulty in reaching the basin.

Cautiously they crept around toward the point where Tom had been "cornered." As they proceeded along their ears were greeted by the sound of approaching footsteps, and stepping aside they secreted themselves in the bushes.

In a moment two or three men—outlaws—passed them in no very pleasant frame of mind going in the direction of the dug-outs. When nearest the two listeners one of them was heard to say:

"It's durned queer how the ole, ugly cussever escaped. We know he didn't come up outen the hole like his fool friend, and how he 'scaped otherwise without the cussed wolves nabbin' him is mighty queer."

To this observation the listeners heard the reply:

"That Kit Bandy's a sly devil, and if he gits away from here alive, business in Bad Lands 'll close."

Old Kit, on hearing this rather personal allusion to himself, nudged Saddle-King Sam with his elbow and chuckled almost aloud.

When the outlaws passed out of hearing the two stepped from their concealment and moved on.

"By the horn o' Joshua! Old Tom's give 'em the slip!" Bandy exclaimed, fairly dancing with joy.

"According to what we heard, that seems to be the case," Sam admitted. "If we have good luck we'll get our forces all together before mornin'."

With extreme caution the two approached the point where Sam had parted with Tom, and after a careful reconnoissance they found the outlaws were all gone. By some means or other they had found out that the supposed Bandy had eluded both them and the wolves and got away; and so the guard had quit their post and returned to the dug outs.

Sam found his tunnel, or rather where it had been, for it had been filled up. He advanced to the edge of the bank, and in a low tone called Rattler's name, but the only reply he received was the whine of a wounded wolf.

They next proceeded to where Rattler had parted with Sam and his young friends, Marshall and Foster; but they found no one there, and with a heart heavy with misgivings the Young Patrol led the way to his rendezvous in the plum-thicket.

As they approached the place, they were challenged by a voice which the Young Patrol recognized as the deep, sonorous voice of Bob Marshall.

Sam answered the challenge and immediately asked:

"Bob, is Harry and Tom Rattler here?"

"Harry is, Sam, but Tom is not; I am rejoiced to know you live, for I was sure the wolves had overcome and devoured you both. Ah! you're not alone!"

Saddle-King Sam introduced Old Kit to Bob and Harry, and then the four sat down and entered into conversation.

The Young Patrol narrated his and Tom's adventures in the wolf-pen, the story of his capture and of his release by Old Kit and the old woman.

"And now, Kit Bandy," Sam finally said, turning to the old detective, "I would like to know who that old woman is that you acted so in concert with?"

"Sabina Bandy, my wife," was the surprising answer.

"Your wife?"

"My wife."

"Then why did you desert her?" questioned Tom.

"Boy, I deserted that woman years and years ago," Bandy replied, the darkness hiding the smile upon his face from his companions; "I deserted her for my health. But for that woman I might 'a' been in Congress, or a governor, or a cashier o' a big bank, retired to Canada, to-day, instead o' snakin' round 'mong Ingins and outlaws and grizzlies for protection."

"Old man," exclaimed Saddle-King Sam, "what do you mean, anyhow?"

"I mean," answered Kit, "that in an evil hour, I, a young, handsome and promising youth, fell in love with Sabina Ellen Frisby, and war by her led to the hyeneal altar. The honeymoon had scarcely waxed and waned before she opened on me as she did on 'em outlaws to-night; and now, alas! what am I? who am I? why am I? Boys, thar's not an inch o' the original epidermis on my body. 'Bina, my wife, has wrought the change. As noble a head as ever stored Solomonian wisdom has been whanged and banged 'tirely out o' its intellect'al shape. My ears have been yanked round till they're so long they flop in the wind

like autumn leaves, and my wife, Sabina, done the yankin'. The cantilever bridge o' my once classical nose went down before a poker gale that riginated in Bina's wrath. Fourteen wisdom teeth went down my throat at one blow from a dornick hurled by Sabe's strong arm, and for no other reason, at that, than 'cause I waltzed seven times one evenin' with Ann Stump, over at Virginia City, and drank a few bumpers with her, and chucked her under the roguish chin once or twice or three times. She is a jealous monster, and as I war a favorite 'mong the ladies beca'se o' my beaucheful society manners, it raised her Ebenezer, and she sot to work to spoil my looks, and she succeeded. Oh! I'm a wreck!—the ruins o' Babylon, the destruction o' Herculeum, the downfall o' the Roman Empire, the Alhambra by moonlight, an unplumed knight, a dismantled ship. Sabina's been my Waterloo. I fled to the mountains, to the sandy desert, to the land o' grizzlies, and Ingins, and pestilence, but, wharver I go, she follers me like a sore heel. I can't escape her. A week ago I heard she war on my trail. I broke for these Bad Lands, thinkin' I'd dodge her here sure. But lo! I'd no sooner set my heart on the pretty face o' Queen Belle, than in pops my old Nemesis with decks cleared for action."

"Well, it was a good thing for me that she popped in when she did," declared Saddle-King Sam, who, while he felt under lasting obligations to the humorous, eccentric and daring old detective, also felt himself as deeply indebted to his plucky little wife, and so was disposed to take her part.

All this Bandy could readily see, but his in-born love of a joke, even under the most trying circumstances, kept from Saddle-King the real facts concerning his wife, who, as the reader that has followed us through other stories knows, was Kit's silent partner, as it were, the inimitable Ichabod Flea.

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed Old Kit; "Bina, my wife, done you a good turn in that imps' nest, but if she'd had the chance she'd done me to a turn; but, Sam, not wishin' to change the subject, what are you folks here for?"

"I am here looking for cattle-thieves, and I have found them," replied Sam; "and it was mere chance that I met Tom Rattler and these young men on their way to the mountains. Now I have answered your question, tell me why you are here?"

"Then you don't b'lieve I come here to escape the wrath o' Ole Sabina?" Kit replied.

"Not altogether."

"Well, ye'r' right, boy," confessed the old detective. "I'm down here lookin' for a young murderess."

"You mean an old one," interposed Sam. "Queen Belle—Belle Rankin, the tigress that tried to fang me to-night."

"No, no," Kit replied; "I mean what I say—a young murderess—a gal that killed her rich uncle and fled. I am sorry to have to tell you, boy, but I've a warrant for the arrest of Zoe Randall for the killin' o' her uncle!"

CHAPTER XIV.

BANDY'S REVELATION.

KIT BANDY'S words fell like a thunderbolt on the ears of Saddle-King Sam. Zoe Randall a murderess! Zoe, the sweet, gentle idol of his young heart!

"Kit Bandy!" he exclaimed, his breath coming thick and hard, "do not jest with me in this cruel way!"

"Saddle-King," the old detective said, in a serious tone, "Zoe Randall is accused of murder—not by me, but by others—a few pesky fools!"

"They are infamous liars!" the young patrol cried, "I don't care who they are!"

"That's what I say, boy," the old detective admitted, "but I never said so before to any one but my pard, Ichabod Flea. I'm satisfied it's a conspiracy of a deep and devilish kind 'g'inst the gal, Zoe."

"What about the murder, Kit? You see I have been on the range nearly three months, and have had no communication with any one."

"Well, some six weeks ago," Kit said, "Henry Randall, of M—C—, was murdered. He was found one morning in his bed in a great pool of blood, his head wounded, and a knife-stab in the side. His niece, Zoe, was gone, nor could she be found high nor low. A close search revealed the fact that all her personal effects of value had been taken away, and upon this was based the suspicion of having done the foul deed, and a warrant for her arrest was sworn out by some hot-heads."

"The fools! the infamous fools!" exclaimed Sam.

"Now, it happened," Kit went on, "that I had been in town 'bout two days, and had made myself known to the mayor, who wanted me to take the case in hand, and I agreed to do so. I went to the Randall residence to look the situation over. The coroner's inquest was just sittin' when I got there, and to the surprise of everybody, it war discovered that Mr. Randall wasn't quite dead—that he was unconscious from the blow on the head. It war a blunderin' oversight that a physician hadn't been called when fu'st found; but then his body was almost cold, and every spark o' life seemed to have gone long before."

"A doctor was brought in, restoratives administered, the wounds dressed, and in the course o' some hours the man began to revive. I waited results, and for nighly a week the man's life hung on a single thread. An eminent doctor was rushed down from Helena, and a consultation held. Finally there came a change for the better—the man regained consciousness and strength, and, by the horn o' Joshua! I left him on the road to recovery."

"Thank God! thank God!" cried Sam; "but what of Zoe, Kit? Is she gone yet?"

"I'm sorry to say that she is," the old man replied. "I had a talk with Mr. Randall 'bout her, and with the neighbors about both of them. Mr. Randall had been attacked in his sleep by his would-be murderers, and knows nothing at all 'bout them. He does not believe, for a moment, his niece had anything to do with the deed, directly or indirectly. The neighbors told me that the two were devotedly attached to each other—that Zoe was a sweet, gentle, loving and lovable gal."

"But as soon as Mr. Randall told me 'bout the attempt made to kill Zoe by one Belle Rankin—the murder that your whip thwarted, boy—when he had told me the hull history of his love affair with that desperate woman, I made up my mind that she war at the bottom o' the hull horrible affair, and that instead o' bein' a fugitive from justice, Zoe had been abducted."

"Great heavens! then she is one of the girls that Old Tom found in that accursed outlaw den!" Sam exclaimed, fairly panting with excitement.

"And what did he say, Sam, about the girl, Diana Moore?" eagerly questioned Harry Foster.

"She was one of the two girls he found there," answered Sam. "But pardon me, Bandy; go on with your story."

"Wal, I set out to find the trail of the murderous abductors, though there war some who still suspected Zoe. How I struck the trail of a suspected party that led me here, I'll not take time to tell. It'll take too long; but here I came, and while I found no Zoe, I did find Belle Rankin, and I'm now satisfied that the trail was the right one, and that Belle Rankin, with the aid of confederates, killed, or attempted to kill, Randall; and to further carry out her scheme of revenge, had Zoe abducted that she might punish her by— Well, God only knows how."

"Oh! the fiend!—the tigress!" hissed Sam, the blood leaping hot through his veins. "Would to God I had a dozen cowboys to follow me, and them basins would run red with blood!"

"Sam," said Harry Foster, "we're not cowboys, but I believe we can fight, and I am ready to follow wherever you lead."

"And here, too," put in big Bob Marshall.

"Boys," said the Young Patrol, "I know you are made of the true metal, but we are not strong enough to attack that hornets' nest."

"Youngsters," spoke up Old Kit, "just keep cool till daylight, and if Tom Rattler shows up in full feather, and I find my pard, Ichabod Flea, we'll be good for them varlets, bag and baggage. We'll bushwhack them till every mother's son o' them's wiped out. That Old Tom's an epidemic, sure enough, and as an Ingin-fighter his equal's not this side o' Judgment Day; and then when it comes to dash, flash and whirlwind fightin', Ichabod Flea's a little nose-gay."

"According to what Tom told me," Saddle-King said, "those two captives were liberated by him, and escaped into the hills; and had not been recaptured up to the time I was a guest in their camp."

"No, they war not thar when I was," Kit added; "but several persons were out in search o' them. It may be Old Tom is lookin' arter them, also, and it wouldn't s'prise me a bit to

see the ugly old vagabond come up smilin' any moment with a gal on each arm."

"If they are wandering alone in these accursed hills under this dismal night, they will die of fear and exposure," Harry Foster declared.

"It's too infernal bad!" exclaimed the bluff young homsteader, not a little excited over the situation, "that we've got to stand here inactive when those poor girls are needin' our help!"

"Boys, it's no use gittin' excited and onstringin' yar narves," Old Kit said advisedly. "The best thing you could do now is to whop yer-selves down on the ground and take a nap. A rest'll be worth two men to us for to-morrow's work."

Admitting the truth of the old man's words, arrangements were at once made to pass the night in the thicket. Each was to take his turn in standing guard, Old Kit taking the first watch; and with this understanding, the other three wrapped their blankets about them and laid down upon the ground to rest if not to sleep.

Thus the night was passed. Daylight dawned with Bob Marshall on guard. Old Kit was the first of the threesleepers to awake. He arose to a sitting posture with a feeling of chilliness pervading his body. To his utmost surprise, he found the blanket with which he had covered himself gone. He rubbed his eyes and gazed around him. On his right lay the sleeping forms of Saddle-King Sam and Harry Foster; on his left lay a third form rolled up, head and feet, in a blanket. Out about twenty paces from camp he saw Bob Marshall standing leaning on his rifle. He rubbed his eyes in evident confusion, sprung to his feet, looked again at the blanketed forms, and then discovered there was one too many!

Stepping to Sam and Harry he awoke them. Just then Bob came up, and when he discovered the "odd number" a blank look of surprise overspread his face. In fact, all were completely astonished to discover a sleeping stranger in their supposed well-guarded camp. And what was more, he had deliberately and silently stolen the blanket from the form of Old Kit Bandy, and appropriated it to his own use.

The four held a whispered consultation, then, with a look of indignation and resentment, Kit Bandy walked over and gave the sleeping thief a gentle kick.

A growl came from beneath the blanket, the figure stirred, and then a grizzled face, wreathed in smiles, was uncovered. It was the face of the redoubtable Tom Rattler!

CHAPTER XV.

A STORMY, YET HAPPY MEETING.

"OLD Tom Rattler!" burst in chorus from the lips of Saddle-King Sam, Bob and Harry, at sight of the smiling face of their old friend.

Kit Bandy started back, grasping his revolver, a look of contemptuous anger upon his face, and in a voice of utter disdain exclaimed:

"Yes, sneakin', thievin' Old Tom Rattler! Villain! fraud! lie still till I shoot you! let that blanket, stolen from the form o' slumberin' innocence be your windin' sheet!"

Harry Foster, who was a matter-of-fact youth, believed Kit was in dead earnest, and, springing between the two old men, implored Bandy not to shoot.

Meanwhile, Rattler unrolled himself from the blanket and rising to his feet stretched himself and yawned.

"All right, boy," said Kit, the look of disdain on his face giving way to a broad smile. "I'll forgive him this time, but, by the horn o' Joshua, I'll—"

"Say, Kitsie, shake!" interrupted Rattler, extending his hand to his old friend, a smile illuminating his wrinkled face.

"God bless your ugly old pacter! Tom, how are yer?" exclaimed Kit, grasping Rattler's hand.

"Well, and happy as a lark since I had a lovely nap," responded the old hunter, his face beaming with joy.

"Tom," said Kit, regretfully, "I'd hoped that the mellowin' influence o' years would make a better man o' you; but here I find ye, with the sins o' a century on yer head, and still growin' wuss—robbin' sleepin' manhood o' his only blanket. Next thing you'll be robbin' wid-ders o' their crust and the dead o' their robes. Tom Rattler, for the millionth time I forgive you for playin' your piratical, midnight-assassin tricks on me. You know me, Tom—that I'm a matter-o'-fact, honest, straight-goods, truth-lovin' man."

"Oh, yes, Kitsie," replied Tom, "you're a

rosy old buccaneer; but I couldn't resist the temptation to take your blanket. I crept into camp, not sure whether friends or foes war here, but when I heard you snorin' like a Yallerstone geyser just afore it begins to squirt, I recognized it, and as you war sleepin' so sweetly and I war tired and had no blanket, why, I helped myself. But if I'd been an Injin or outlaw instead o' the Great Red River Epidemic, Kit Bandy, the great holy-terror-detective would now be wolf-pizen. But I'm really glad to see you lookin' so well, Kitsie; told any truth lately?"

"One," was Kit's laconic answer; "I told Saddle-King Sam last night that I, Ka-ristopher Ko-lumbuss Bandy, war positively disgraced when the notorious 'Queen Belle' o' yander outlaw band took such a homely, pestiferous, ugly soul as Tom Rattler for the superb Mountain Detective. When Belle learns the truth she'll go feed herself to the wolves."

Despite the dangers of their surroundings and the deep anxiety in their breasts, the Young Patrol and his young friends could not help laughing at the lively manner in which the two whimsical old friends fired their greetings at each other, all the while shaking hands in a way that told of the unbounded joy of their meeting.

Finally Rattler turned to Saddle-King Sam and said:

"Boy, I'm rejoiced from the bottom o' my heart to see you here alive and well. How did you give them varmints the slip?"

"Kit Bandy and his wife rescued me," answered Sam.

"Kit Bandy and his wife," repeated Old Tom, with a shake of the head; then, turning to Kit, he asked: "have you been spinnin' that ancient, hoary lie to these boys 'bout your wife Sabina?"

"He told us of his domestic trouble, Tom," Saddle-King Sam answered for him.

"Domestic fiddlesticks!" exclaimed Tom; "that's all a great Bandy falsehood, boy. That woman Sabina is a man—Ichabod Flea, and Ichabod Flea is the main man in the detective business. Old Kit Bandy alone's a fraud, and without the skill, and cunning, and watchful care o' Ichabod Flea, he couldn't detect hunger from thirst, or a bar's trail from that o' a society woman's. Yes, Sabina Bandy is Ichabod Flea, and a dandy little cyclone she—be is. Ichabod furnishes the brains and skill, and Kit the lip and legs o' the Kit Bandy Detective 'Sociation. Isn't that all so, Kitsie?"

"Go on, Tom, you've the floor," said Kit, with a wave of the hand, "you're wound up, and it's no use for me to deny or affirm till you're run down. But let me slide in edge-ways the truthful assertion that we discovered that you'd escaped from the wolf burrow, and the boys wondered how you'd ever eluded them wolves, and I informed them that a ki-yote knew enough not to eat some kind o' p'izens."

"How did you escape, anyhow, Tom?" asked Sam, nearly ready to explode with laughter at the ridiculous Old Bandy.

"After the varmints captured you," Tom explained, "and started off along the basin, the wolves, thinkin' they war goin' to git another feedin' follered along the bank after you. Every one o' them, 'cept a few dead ones left, and seein' this I crept from the burrow, stole along the bank to the south side whar some long roots o' sagebrush hung bare at the side o' the bank, and catchin' hold o' these, I drew myself up and out o' the pit. Then I made my way to whar we'd last parted afore I started to reconnoiter, but meetin' no one thar I sot out to look 'bout that gal, Dianar Moore, and that other gal I told you 'bout, thinkin' I might find 'em. I hunted for hours and hours, run into outlaw scouts twice and give one o' them a kidney-tosser, too. Then, when I knew it must be gittin' to'rds mornin', I struck for this camp, thinkin' if any o' you war alive I'd find you here. To make sure the place wasn't occupied by outlaws, I done some fine sneak-work, and got in just as it war gittin' light enough for me to distinguish the feachers o' the sleepin' beauty, Kit Bandy. As Bob didn't see me, and I wanted a little nap, and didn't want to disturb you sleepers, I tenderly borrowed the superb's blanket and turned in. I'm afeard, boys, the outlaws got the gals back ag'in, and if they did, we'll have fun to rescue 'em after what's happened. But, by the great Rosycrusians! I'm willin' to stay in these accursed hills ten years and fight for them gals! If it hadn't been for that tormented old squaw, Birdie, that I told you 'bout, Sam, the gals'd now be safe. Condemn her! I wish she had to live with Old Kit Bandy all the rest o' her days!"

"Well, what had we better do, anyhow?"

asked Saddle-King Sam; "it does seem as though we had ought to be doing something, if it's only getting away from here."

"Boys," said Old Kit, "let me tell you: About five or six miles north o' that robbers' roost, in one o' the most God-forsaken places I ever saw, Ichabod Flea and I pitched our camp. There we have two Winchesters, and two hundred rounds o' fodder for 'em, some grub, our hosses, and so forth. When Ichabod left me arter tyin' me on Sabina's trick mule, the understandin' was that we should meet at camp. Now, it may be Flea has found the gals and taken 'em to camp, which, by the way, is nigh to the head-waters o' a little creek that flows to the Powder River. So I perpose, we make to that camp and 'stablish it as a base o' operations; and then go in for exterminatin' Queen Belle's hull gang o' cattle-stealin', wolf-herdin', gal-thievin' bushrangers."

"That's a good suggestion," said Old Rattler, to whom the others looked for an answer.

And so it was thus settled, and after the five had devoured the last morsel of Saddle-King Sam's food, the Young Patrol packed their blankets and effects upon his horse and then they set off for Bandy's camp, to reach which they would be compelled to make a wide detour of the outlaw camp, and, consequently, travel over fifteen miles.

The fog still lingered. The fifth day of that dismal, murky mist had set in, but now that the outlaws' quarters had been located, Saddle-King Sam and his friends hoped that it might continue until the dangerous work before them had been accomplished.

CHAPTER XVI.

A FRIEND IN NEED, ETC.

ENCOURAGED by the words of the daring Tom Rattler, Diana Moore, the homesteader's fair daughter, and her captive friend, who, as had been suspected, was Zoe Randall, summoned every energy of mind and body in an effort to escape from that horrible outlaw den.

Swiftly they flew up the steps in the bank, as Tom had directed them, and when at the top they glanced back and saw their friend struggling to escape the clutches of the irate squaw, Birdie. They also beheld Lasso Jack riding furiously down the opening, but with no other thought than that the old hunter would make good their escape, they ran on into the brush-clad Hills like frightened deer. The hope of liberty lent speed to their feet, and rapidly the distance between them and the basin widened. They followed the low grounds between the hills, which led them in a zigzag course, but as near as they could they kept toward the east, as directed by their old rescuer.

They ran on nearly a mile before either spoke. The failure of the old hunter to join them filled Diana's breast with a vague fear, and she finally remarked:

"Zoe, I am dreadfully afraid our rescuer has met with trouble, or else has missed us in his hurry."

"Oh! I hope and pray it is neither, Diana!" Zoe replied, her pale face wrought with fear and anxiety. "It will be dreadful to be alone in these hills in this wretched fog, not knowing where to go to elude recapture. And if we are taken back to that prison, I fear Queen Belle will not stand longer between us and our souls' destruction. You know she promised us no harm or insult should ever be offered us, so long as we did not attempt to escape."

"We must not be recaptured, Zoe," declared the brave little Diana, her face flushed with resolute determination; "that woman is a fiend. I do not believe she was holding us for ransom, as she claimed. She had some other wicked purpose in view."

"She has no ambition but that of revenge, Diana," Zoe said. "To punish those who have ever crossed her path, and they are not a few, is all she seems to live for. She owed my uncle a grudge and she sent her assassin confederates into our home and murdered him in his bed. I was carried away a prisoner to this country because the grudge she held against Uncle Henry she, also, held against me. And more than all others she hates Saddle-King Sam, who she daily hopes may fall into the hands of her bloody gang. She has scouts on the plain watching for him, for as he is a special Range Patrol there is no telling where he may be found."

"I am sure she can have no grudge against me or any of my friends," Diana said.

"She has a grudge against all womankind, even herself, and half of mankind. Oh! she is a heartless, wicked woman; and yet there are

times when she seems to have feelings of penitence. Since I have been in her power she has come to me twice, and sat down and talked over the past, and cried like a child, and seemed so in earnest in her sadness and remorse that my heart would be touched; then, all at once, she would fly into a passion and rave and curse like a maniac until I shuddered—"

"Deary me! deary me!"

It was a strange voice pitched in a high key that thus exclaimed, cutting short Zoe's words; and stopping still, the girls started back, for they suddenly found themselves confronted by a little old woman who stood with uplifted hands, her wrinkled face the picture of surprise, in the road before them.

Diana Moore was a brave and fearless girl, and although surprised by the unexpected appearance of the woman, she quickly exclaimed:

"Who are you?"

"Don't be skeered, little girls; I'm Mrs. Bandy, the man-hater, the friend of the innocent. Fear me not, for I'm your friend whether you need one or not."

"Indeed we are in need of friends, Mrs. Bandy," responded Diana, greatly relieved by the kindly look on the old woman's face.

"Whence come you, gals?" the old woman asked.

"From the outlaws' stronghold. We have been captives there, and just escaped."

"Yes, and there comes two varlets after you, I expect!" the old woman suddenly exclaimed.

The fugitives glanced back, and to their horror beheld an outlaw and an Indian coming close upon them.

With a cry the girls sprang forward to the side of the old woman.

"Oh!" exclaimed the outlaw, with a triumphant leer, "we've found the chicks and the old hen, too! This is howlin' fine luck!"

"Stand back, villains!" shrieked the old woman, fiercely, as she placed a protecting arm about each of the girls; "don't dare tech these gals or I'll scratch yer eyes out!"

"Oh, my!" exclaimed the bushranger, sarcastically, "it's an ole cat 'stead o' poultry. How she spits! Smudgy, you gobble the ancient feline, and I'll see to the kittens!"

The two rushed upon the women, the Indian, "Smudgy," seizing Old Sabina, and the outlaw grasping each of the girls by an arm, and despite their struggles, the latter were held as if in a vise.

But the old woman was not so easily managed, and the outlaw turned and watched the struggle going on between her and the Indian. The two had grappled in a hand-to-hand struggle, and were whirling to and fro like a pair of well-matched athletes.

The outlaw burst into a roar of laughter when he saw the Indian's nose bleeding copiously from the effects of a blow, and him hugging the old woman desperately to prevent her using her fists on his face again.

Thus the struggle continued for some moments, when a dull sound, like the muffled report of a pistol, was heard, and instantly thereafter the Indian released his hold on the old woman, and with his face contorted by a horrible grimace, staggered to one side and fell dead.

The outlaw's laugh was quickly changed to a desperate oath when he saw his red friend fall, powder-smoke and blood issuing from a hole in his naked breast, into which the contents of a pistol—smoke and ball—had been emptied. However, before he had fully comprehended the situation, Old Sabina turned and fired two shots in quick succession, point-blank into his face, and with a faint groan he sunk down in his tracks between the girls.

"There, now! the old cat's saved her kittens!" Sabina said, as calmly as though she had dispatched a couple of coyotes; "but, my dear girls! you're scart nighly to death, and the danger's all over with."

"Oh, Mrs. Bandy! you are a brave, fearless woman!" Diana at length found breath to say.

"Girls, I'm no woman but a man—Ichabod Flea—partner of Old Kit Bandy," the disguised little detective confessed. "It may seem mean to you for a man to go sailin' around in petticoats, but the end justifies the means. We detectives resort to many disguises to outwit and run down the guilty. What's your name, miss?"

"Diana Moore."

"And yours?" turning to the other.

"Zoe Randall."

"The very girl Kit and I are huntin' for!" declared the old detective; "the very identical girl!"

"Oh! thank heaven!" cried Zoe; "then I still have friends that care for me!"

"Swads o' them, Miss Randall, though there were a few cranks that suspected you of havin' killed your uncle, or tried to, for your uncle isn't dead by a long shot."

"Mr. Flea, is my uncle living?" gasped the trembling girl.

"Was ten days ago," was the answer.

A cry of almost frantic joy burst from Zoe's lips.

"Oh, blessed news!" she exclaimed, crying and laughing by turns. "Queen Belle told me he was dead—that he had been slain the night I was carried away!"

"He was left for dead sure," Flea explained, "but, after a heroic struggle with the grim monster, he won the battle, and was improv'in' rapidly when we set out to look for you. Your absence, when we learned of it, was bad as a knife-thrust, almost. Kit and I set to work to hunt the assassins down, and when we learned of the threats of one Belle Rankin against your uncle's life, and her attempt to take yours, we made up our case at once, and struck out. I needn't stop to tell you how we got onto the trail of a suspicious party that passed down through the hills toward the east the day after the murder. We followed that trail step by step, and mile by mile, until we landed in this blighted country, and lo! here's our girl!"

"And my abductors are not far away," Zoe added. "There is a strong band of outlaws, cattle-thieves and renegade Indians hiding in these Hills. Belle Rankin is with them. She has a brother in the band. She is queen of the camp, and her word is almost as good as law. She is a cruel, vindictive and revengeful woman!"

"But how comes you gals here?" asked Flea.

"While the men were all up at their branding-pen and Queen Belle was out riding, an old man—a hunter, I should say—entered the dug-out where we were in charge of an Indian squaw and liberated us."

"Where is he now?"

"We left him in the basin having difficulty with the squaw, and I'm afraid he has met with trouble. We did as he told us, and fled into the Hills."

"How did he come into camp? foot or horse-back?"

"We do not know," Zoe answered. "The first we saw of him was when he entered our room. He was an elderly man with a scant beard and dressed like a hunter or border-man."

"By Jupiter!" exclaimed Flea; "it must be my pard, Kit Bandy! It keeps me busy gittin' him out of trouble, and that's where this old female rig comes in. I'd ought to see 'bout him, I declare I had."

"Then do not let us delay you, for it is growing dark now," exclaimed Diana, who, in her fear and excitement, forgot that their rescuer was Tom Rattler, whom she had met days before on the Dakota plain.

"Girls, will you await my return?" Ichabod asked.

"We will be only too glad to," was the answer.

"Then follow me," he said, leading the way around a hill to a thicket over the top of which ran a perfect mat of vines so heavy that the bushes were bending under their load, and so dense that every ray of light was excluded; "now, then," he continued, "you gals bounce under that shelter, and there remain till daylight unless I call for you before. Don't git uneasy—don't git scared—don't talk above a whisper—don't move if you hear a sound you think might be by me. I'll give a low whistle when I return. Now skip under there into the darkness. Remember the whistle—good-night."

And he was gone.

The maidens crept in under the canopy of bush and vine and settled themselves down to wait. They wrapped the blankets which they had been so thoughtful to bring with them around their heads and shoulders to protect them from the damp, chilly air.

Soon it was pitchy dark in their retreat, and feeling that they were, for the time being, secure, they entered into a whispered conversation. And thus they passed hour after hour, eagerly waiting the return of their friend, hoping and praying their first rescuer had escaped the outlaws, discussing their perilous situation and the causes that led to it. It was the first time the girls had had an opportunity to carry on an unrestricted conversation since they had been thrown together, and girl-like they improved the opportunity.

At length their ears were greeted by the promised signal-whistle of Ichabod Flea, and,

answering it with joyfully-throbbing hearts, they started to creep from their covert, when they were met by their friend who said:

"Gals, we'll have to remain here to-night. It's too dark to move. I've been three hours crawlin' 'round trying to find this place, at the same time keepin' out o' the clutches of outlaw scouts that are roamin' through these pestiferous hills."

"And did you find our rescuer to be your friend?" eagerly questioned Diana.

"From what I learned your rescuer was Old Tom Rattler, a noted hunter and scout," replied Flea.

"Tom Rattler!" exclaimed Diana; "oh! it was that hunter, Zoe, that released us—one of the three men I told you about meeting on the plain a few days ago. In my excitement I forgot it was him until now. But what became of him, Mr. Flea?"

"The old man's in trouble; the outlaws got him and he may be dead by this time," was the sad and startling news Ichabod communicated. "But," he went on, after the girls' outburst of grief had somewhat subsided, "I found my pard, Kit Bandy, in the outlaw camp passing himself as Nicholas Lamb; and even while I tarried in the enemies' dug-out, Saddle-King Sam, the Range Patrol, was brought in a prisoner."

"Saddle-King Sam!" gasped Zoe, her breath coming quick and hard, "do you mean to tell me Saddle-King Sam is in the power of Belle Rankin and her murderous followers?"

"He was, but Old Kit and I, after a beautiful little fight, in which I had to handle Queen Belle rather rudely, released him—"

"Oh, you dear, brave men!" cried Zoe, smiling through her tears, "I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Did you tell Sam of my whereabouts?"

"Had no time for a single word. He and Kit went off in one direction and I returned here. We'll be apt to find 'em at our camp five or six miles from here in the morning, no preventing Providence."

Ichabod Flea helped to while away the gloomy hours of that night by narrating the particulars of his adventure as Mrs. Bandy in the outlaw camp, the story of Queen Belle's rage at sight of the Young Patrol, of the fight and its result, and of the manner in which Bandy had deceived the foe and gained admittance to their camp as Nicholas Lamb, the Mazeppa.

At length day dawned, but the wretched black fog still hung low over the hills.

Creeping from their concealment Ichabod and the maidens started for the detectives' camp miles away.

They had gone some two or three miles when their ears were suddenly greeted by the shouts of men and the clatter of hoofs.

They stopped to listen. The rattle of hoofs sounded near; then from around the spur of a hillock, looming up through the fog, weird and unnatural, swept into sight a rider, with bare head, long, flying hair, and bloody face, mounted upon a strange, white-horned steed from whose mouth hung a long red tongue, and from whose red nostrils poured the hot breath like hissing steam.

CHAPTER XVII.

A LIVELY RIDE.

We left Saddle-King Sam and his four friends on their way to Bandy's camp, north of the robbers' rendezvous.

Old Kit led the way, moving off with the firm and elastic step of youth.

Half the distance to the camp had been traversed when a bunch of fifty or sixty head of cattle was discovered grazing in a narrow valley or defile on their right, and some forty rods away.

"I dare say it's a bunch of cattle that's been run in here from the range to be rebranded," said Saddle-King Sam; "and while they are in sight, I've a notion to run down and see what brand they carry, if they have not already received that of the Sand Creek thieves. I'll ride across the Hills and meet you."

Mounting his horse, the Young Patrol rode down the valley, while his friends moved on.

As the youth approached the cattle they took fright and started off at a lively pace down the long, narrow valley. He put spurs to overtake them, and, when close upon the heels of the herd, he suddenly discovered that no less than seven or eight horsemen had sprung out of the hillside behind him and were following at a breakneck speed. A glance told him they were outlaws, and at the very front rode the notorious Belle Rankin!

Sam quickly glanced to the right and then the left. The banks of the defile were steep and broken, and covered with impenetrable fringes of brush and vines. There was no turning aside, and so he urged his horse forward into a new burst of speed. He was soon pressing hard upon the now thoroughly frightened cattle, and, to his horror, he all at once discovered that the defile before him narrowed suddenly to a width of less than twelve feet, while the banks on either side rose high and perpendicular. For this he would have cared nothing had the way before him been clear of the cattle. He knew that a jam was unavoidable; and he was right. The panic-stricken beasts rushed into the narrow throat of the pass, and those in the lead became effectually wedged between the walls, checking the whole herd, and jamming it into a struggling heap.

For Sam Halliday there was no turning to right, or left, or back. The foe were sweeping down upon him already, yelling like triumphant demons over what seemed his certain capture. But, nothing daunted, the intrepid, quick-witted young ranchero spurred his horse forward until it was among the struggling, bellowing and lunging cattle, and could go no further. Then rising to his feet in his saddle, he deliberately leaped upon a steer and ran forward over the writhing, squirming backs of the herd. Once he tripped and fell over a horn suddenly tossed in the air, but so closely were the animals crowding that he could not fall through between them, and quickly regaining his feet, he forged on, from back to back—tumbling and scrambling among the horns and over sleek and wriggling forms. He soon reached the front of the jam where a number of heavy animals were wedged between the walls of the defile, but a huge steer, whose body was the "keystone" to the jam, was just struggling out. In a few moments more the blockade would be removed and the herd enabled to escape, but to Sam it promised death under the hoofs of the frantic beasts. This he saw at a glance, and again his presence of mind came to the rescue. He dropped astride the big steer's back. His presence there frightened the steer almost to death, and with a desperate effort it tore itself from the jam, lunged forward with a snort, and with lowered head and frantic bellowings, darted off down the defile like the wind with Saddle-King Sam astride its back.

And never did the young ranchman's skill as a rider stand him in hand more than now. The frantic beast leaped wildly into the air, lunged forward with lowered head and bowing back, but all its efforts to dislodge its rider were futile, and finally it settled down to a dead run which soon left its mates far behind. It was a long-limbed, rangy animal, and the speed with which it tore off through the hills almost took Sam's breath. Over the rough and uneven ground, over ditches and hillocks, and through thickets it dashed, but firm astride its bony back, as if a part of the animal itself, sat the daring Saddle-King.

The Young Patrol, however, sustained some ugly scratches on his neck, face and hands, from which the blood flowed freely, and his clothes were fairly riddled in his passage through the thickets.

Swift as the wind the great, wild steer thundered on. Swift the miles glided to the rear. There seemed no failure in the animal's strength or speed, and Sam began to realize that he was being carried beyond the reach of his friends as well as his enemies. At least, it appeared so to him. To stop the steer was impossible, and to attempt to leap from its back while moving at such a speed might be attended with loss of life or limb.

Suddenly he beheld three forms emerge from the fog before him. He turned his eyes as he sped past them. The sweet yet pale and distressed face of Zoe Randall swept across his vision! A cry burst from his lips. He glanced back. He saw Zoe gazing after him, her arms outstretched toward him as if imploring him to return to her. Quickly he drew his revolver and, pointing it forward at the base of the steer's brain, fired.

The animal fell dead, but the momentum of its great body hurled it heels over head thirty feet forward. This, however, was not unexpected by the Young Patrol, and he prepared himself for it. He was flung headlong to the earth despite his precaution, but quickly regaining his feet he gazed around him to get his bearings. He saw the three forms he had passed and started toward them.

Leaving her friends, Zoe Randall ran to meet her lover.

With open arms and rapturous heart, the

young ranchero clasped the maiden to his breast.

But few words had passed between them, however, when Ichabod Flea, approaching with Diana Moore, suddenly exclaimed:

"Cut that short, folks! thar comes a gang o' bush-rangers, with that she-devil, Queen Belle, in the lead!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE OUTLAWS REPULSED.

QUICKLY the Young Patrol and Zoe turned and hurried into the bushes, and were joined by Ichabod and Diana.

The outlaws, eight in number including Queen Belle, came on at a gallop, the woman dropping to the rear as they approached, while Lasso Jack, mounted upon Sam's own horse, forged to the front and whirled into the thicket, expecting to ride the fugitives down.

But never had men been more mistaken in the men with whom they had to deal than those outlaws were in Saddle-King Sam and Ichabod Flea. Scarcely had they ridden two rods into the brush when two revolvers began to bark, and at the first fire Lasso Jack and a friend at his side tumbled from their saddles. A third man met the same fate, and a fourth was wounded; and then the others turned and fled as rapidly as they had approached—much wiser and terribly frightened.

Halliday succeeded in catching his own horse and that of one of the outlaws, while Ichabod appropriated the weapons of the fallen freebooters.

Zoe and Diana were placed upon the horses and the march toward Kit and Ichabod's camp resumed, Saddle-King Sam feeling amply repaid for his wild ride in his meeting with Zoe Randall. On their way Zoe told the story of her presence there, which was substantially as follows:

On the night she was abducted from her uncle's home, her uncle had been in bed some time, and she was preparing to retire, when a blanket was thrown over her head, her arms pinioned, and then she was lifted bodily, carried out of the house and placed in the arms of a man—a horseman—who rode rapidly away with her. How her abductor gained admittance to the house was a mystery to her. As to what befell her uncle, she knew nothing until they had reached the outlaw stronghold, several days later, when Belle Rankin told her he had been killed, and that one Judson Harle, the man who had dealt the blow, was to have her—Zoe—as his pay for the work. But for some reason the murderer and the kidnappers had become separated in the midnight darkness, and Harle had not been seen since, yet Queen Belle had daily and hourly expected him at their retreat in the Bad Lands, and for him had the captive been jealously guarded.

The four finally reached camp and there found Kit Bandy and his friends awaiting their coming, wholly ignorant of the adventure Sam had had since leaving them, until related by the young ranchman himself.

Old Kit at once engaged Zoe Randall in conversation in relation to her abduction, and when the maiden told him all she had previously narrated to Saddle-King, the old detective overwhelmed her with the happy information that her uncle still lived.

Tom Rattler, Bob Marshall and Harry Foster renewed their acquaintance with Diana Moore, who gave them the particulars of her capture by the outlaws within two hours after her meeting with them on the Dakota plain.

"And how did ye git the chance to write or dot that message Saddle-King found in your glove?" questioned Old Tom.

"Then my glove and message was really found?" the girl exclaimed, in apparent surprise.

"Yes, Miss Moore," Harry answered, taking the glove from his pocket; "for the second time I have the pleasure of handing you this glove."

"Thank you, sir," she said, taking the glove, a little flush mounting to her cheeks. "When I dropped this glove I was feeling very despondent. The way I came to prepare that message was this: while coming down through the Bad Lands I made up my mind to escape, if I could, when a favorable opportunity was offered. When that time came, as I thought, I leaped from my saddle and ran fast as I could through the bushes, and when I succeeded in eluding my captors, I tore a slip from the sweat-band of my hat, and with a pin pricked the message, placed it in one of my gloves to be dropped along our trail should I be recaptured. Of course I was

soon found and taken on to the outlaws' home, and on the way I dropped the glove."

"I war awful afraid you war a leetle venture-some when you rode away arter your hounds that day, Dianar," Old Tom said, "and I 'spect your friends 'll be terribly worried 'bout your being away."

"Oh, indeed, my poor father will be almost distracted!" the maiden declared, a pained look upon her face.

"Miss Moore, you are now with friends who will see that you are taken back safely to your father," Harry Foster assured the maiden.

Before the girl could respond to his kind assurance, Old Kit called on each of the party for an expression of opinion in regard to the course they should next pursue.

CHAPTER XIX.

TOO LATE—DEATH!

ONCE more we will return to the retreat of the outlaws of the Bad Lands; and, as we do so, we find Queen Belle in one of her usual moods of ungovernable rage. She has but just returned from her ride through the hills in pursuit of Saddle-King Sam, minus her most trustworthy lieutenant, Lasso Jack, who, along with three others, had been killed and wounded by the hated Sam Halliday and Ichabod Flea.

After the woman had cooled down somewhat, she called a meeting of the surviving members of the band to discuss the situation; though Captain Dead-Eye, the chief of the wolf-herders, and Enoch Brooks, the cattle-thief, were the only men whose judgment was worthy of consideration since that great arch-villain, Jack Rubell, the "queen's" premier, had been killed. The meeting soon developed the fact that great uneasiness prevailed among its members. It was found that over one-third of the band had been killed by the intruders, whose numbers the scouts had magnified into alarming proportions; and the belief was prevalent that all would be slain if they remained there. Immediate flight to the mountain fastnesses seemed the only avenue of escape open, and this they finally decided to take under cover of the coming night.

To be driven to this extremity was a terrible blow to the wicked, revengeful Queen Belle; though she could have left there quite happily had she not known that Zoe Randall lived to triumph over her defeat. For weeks the pet of her revengeful heart had been the crushing of Zoe's spirit, the destruction of her soul and body—to consign her, to shame and infamy. Almost daily, since the girl's abduction, had she reminded the captive of the fate that awaited her in the coming of Judson Harle. To forego this long-cherished revenge against the innocent girl was, indeed, a hard thing for the wicked, heartless woman to do; but fate was against her and she was forced to yield to the inevitable.

So she, as well as the others, began packing up such of her effects as she wished to carry with her. It did not take long to do this, and then the once proud and haughty "Queen" of No Man's Land had nothing to do but to sit down to await the coming of night, under the friendly cover of which she hoped to escape the dangers of her own "realm."

The band had not only counted upon the shadows of night, but the continuation of the fog, also, to cover their movements; but again fate seemed against them, for quite an hour before sunset the fog lifted, the sky cleared off and the sun blazed forth in dazzling splendor. And, to make matters still worse, the moon was in the zenith when the sun went down, and the night was as light as the five preceding days had been gloomy.

However, their departure dare not be delayed, and an hour after nightfall their horses, saddled and bridled, and ready for riders and packs, were brought up to the dug-outs.

Then there was a hurrying to and fro that was clearly indicative of great fear and uneasiness. The Queen Belle observed and did not hesitate to berate her friends for it; but that their fear was not without excuse was suddenly made manifest by a stentorian voice demanding:

"Surrender there, every man and woman of you!"

Queen Belle recognized the voice, and, turning, she saw the tall form of Saddle-King Sam emerge from the shadows of the bank, just north of the dug-outs, into the moonlight, followed by five others with gleaming rifles held for instant use.

The ruffians were some twenty paces away,

and Saddle-King Sam's command was almost instantly answered by a shot from the Queen's revolver, the bullet cutting close to Sam's head. It was an unfortunate shot, however, for the desperate woman, for it was the signal for Sam and his friends to fire; a volley was poured into the outlaws' ranks at random, and the "queen" was among the number shot down.

The fight was now on, and the Young Patrol, Kit Bandy, Tom Rattler and their friends uttered a yell and charged upon their foe. But little resistance, however, was made, and the conflict soon ended.

Those of the scoundrels who were not killed or wounded broke for the hills, while their frightened horses, some of them wounded, fled in all directions.

Besides Queen Belle, Captain Dead-Eye was slain, and Enoch Brooks was mortally wounded. "Birdie," the squaw wife of the old wolf-herder, was unharmed. But she did not try to escape. With an unusual savage devotion to her dead master she remained at his side, tearless, silent, defiant.

But the victory had not been entirely bloodless. In the feeble resistance offered by the foe Bob Marshall and Saddle-King Sam had been wounded—the former seriously, the latter painfully.

They were at once taken into a dug-out, a light procured, and their wounds dressed by Ichabod Flea, who was possessed of no little surgical skill.

In the mean time Zoe and Diana had been escorted from their concealment in the hills to the dug-outs, and there both did all in their power to alleviate the wants and pains of the suffering men.

Such of the outlaws' effects as were needed to make the situation comfortable were taken possession of; and after their own wounded had been cared for those of their enemies were looked after. Besides the wounded Enoch Brooks, there were two Indians whose hurts were very serious. They were placed in one of the caves and their wounds dressed. In a short time Brooks died, and during the night the two wounded red-skins crawled out and away into the hills, where both were found dead two days later.

The burial of the dead was the next thing that demanded attention, and two spades being found in one of the rooms the victors began the melancholy labor of grave-digging by moonlight.

"Birdie" remained by her dead master until his body was covered in the grave. Not a word did she utter—not a tear did she shed. If she suffered the least sorrow or grief—and there is no doubt but she did—she concealed it most effectually.

Wicked as Queen Belle had been, Zoe and Diana, their woman's natures touched, looked upon her dead face with pity and forgiving kindness, and with gentle hands prepared her body for burial. But when it was laid in the grave, the pale face and pallid brow were alone kissed by the soft moonbeams. There were no tears, no prayers. All was silence, sadness.

On the very next day after the defeat of the outlaws a party of mounted horsemen was discovered approaching through the hills from the east, and upon investigation it was found to be a party in search of Diana—the maiden's father being among them. The trail of Diana's captors had been found by a friendly Indian scout, who had followed it to its end in the Bad Lands.

As it was apparent that many days must elapse before Bob Marshall would be able to travel, Mr. Moore sent his friends back home with the news of Diana's safety, while he and his daughter remained to help care for the wounded man who had risked his life in the girl's behalf.

Neither Bob nor Harry had any desire to go on to the mountains. They had had enough excitement and "recreation" to satisfy them for a year at least. Moreover, Harry Foster had lost interest in all else than Diana Moore, and during their two weeks' sojourn in the hills, a friendship sprung up between the two that eventually culminated in Harry becoming a Dakota homesteader and the husband of the fair young huntress.

Zoe and Diana took pity on the squaw, "Birdie," and coaxed her to share their room, or dug-out, with them, assuring her that she had nothing more to fear. She remained with them several days and became quite communicative with all but Old Tom Rattler, who watched her like a hawk, for he believed she was simply lingering there, nursing her savage

wrath, watching for an opportunity to repay him for the ungallant manner in which he had been compelled to handle her the day previous. But his suspicions proved to be without foundation, for one night Birdie stole a horse and disappeared.

During the squaw's stay, however, Kit Bandy and Saddle-King Sam obtained from her a partial history of the place.

It appeared that her husband, Dead-Eye, three other white men, and some five renegade Indians, had been the first to locate there, some four years previous, not from choice but necessity, for the whole gang were wanted by the officers of justice for the murder of a band of Crow Indians, over in the mountains. The advantages of the place, not only as a refuge from justice, but as breeding-grounds for wolves, were at once made apparent, and the business begun, and made quite remunerative.

Finally, Lasso Jack and Enoch Brooks, who were old friends of Dead-Eye, and admirers of Belle Rankin, came there and arranged to go into cattle-stealing, using the Sand Creek Ranch as a blind. Belle Rankin came there with a brother, a notorious desperado, and was honored with the distinctive title of Queen Belle, of No Man's Land, and she soon proved herself a queen, not only in name, but in fact. From this point she carried on her operations against her enemies, seeming to live for no other purpose than to kill, destroy and ruin.

With the destruction of this notorious nest of outlaws, cattle-stealing ceased on the eastern Montana Range, though great was the surprise of all when Saddle-King Sam reported the true character of the Sand Creek Ranch.

As to the motive that led to the abduction of Diana Moore, the squaw, Birdie, gave this story: A party of four had been over to Eastern Dakota to dispose of some stolen horses, and on their return came suddenly upon the girl on the plain, and, through fear of their presence there, and the course they were traveling, leading to suspicion and detection, should she be permitted to go on her way, they brought her in with them, her youth and beauty, in all probability, saving her life on the plain for a living death in the villains' stronghold. But, thanks to a merciful Providence, through the fearless courage of the Young Patrol, the intrepid Tom Rattler, the fearless old detective, Kit Bandy, and his little pard, Bob Marshall, and Harry Foster, both Diana and Zoe were rescued, unharmed, from the hands of the ranch ruffians.

Old Kit, Saddle-King Sam and Zoe Randall remained in the outlaw camp until Bob Marshall was able to start on his homeward journey; then they took up their line of march westward, accompanied by Tom Rattler.

In due time they reached M—C—, and when it became known that the redoubtable Kit Bandy had returned, bringing with him the fair Zoe, the wildest joy prevailed. The old detective and his little pard were the heroes of the hour. They were banqueted in true Western style, and invited to take possession of the town and paint it gory red all over, if they desired to do so.

Tough Tom Rattler, too, came in for a share of the honors of the little mountain village, for the part he had taken in the rescue of the maiden, and right royally did the two old friends enjoy themselves for a day in that hospitable place.

Zoe found her uncle well on the road to recovery. From her he first learned for a certainty that his attempted assassination and her abduction were the work of the notorious Belle Rankin; and when this news was supplemented by that of the desperate woman's death, he thanked his stars that he had nothing more to fear from the siren he was once on the eve of making his wife!

At the next meeting of the cattlemen's association, Saddle-King Sam was called upon for a detailed, verbal report of his experience as a range patrol, and the story he gave of his lonely ride over the plains, and of his and his friends' thrilling adventures in the Bad Lands, was decidedly interesting.

Before the meeting adjourned it was decided to remunerate the Young Patrol in a more substantial way than with a monthly salary and a vote of thanks. It was proposed by the owners of the "P. V. L." Ranch, who had been the greatest losers by the operations of the Sand Creek thieves, that all the cattle on the range carrying the brand of that reputed ranch—Sand Creek—be declared the property of Sam Halliday, by "right of discovery," as it were.

To this every man agreed, and thus the young ranchero became the possessor of quite a little bunch of cattle, which, in the course of years, increased to such numbers that Saddle-King became, in truth, a cattle-king.

And, in the mean time, he became the king of loving husbands in a home where Zoe reigns as queen, beauteous womanhood her crown, affection her scepter.

THE END.

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BEADLE AND ADAMS, Publishers,
98 William Street, New York.